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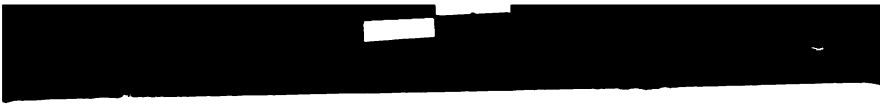




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THE FAR TRIUMPH

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"ASK HER IF HE USED GUSTAV'S NAME TO SETTLE AN INCOME ON HER."

THE FAR TRIUMPH

By
ELIZABETH DEJEANS
AUTHOR OF "THE WINNING CHANCE" AND
"THE HEART OF DESIRE"

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR BY
MARTIN JUSTICE



PHILADELPHIA & LONDON
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1911

ILLUSTRATIONS

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Kansas City 6 Jan 1926



THE FAR TRIUMPH

CHAPTER I

"Soo come lee—soo come lee . . . soo, soo, soo——"

Esther poised herself again, tiptoe, on the very verge of the ledge, her arms lifted like outstretched wings, and again her clear voice rose and fell, and rose again, sweet, vibrant, lingering, "Soo come lee . . . s-o-o c-o-m-e lee . . . soo, s-oo, s-o-o." The echo rang from across the river, travelled from boulder to boulder up the gorge, ending in a last, faint, far-away whisper. She listened with bent head and parted lips—still listened—and suddenly out of the greater and the still greater distance it came, reluctantly, an infinitesimal answer, "S-o-o, s-o-o." It lighted the smile in her face, curving her lips, and lowering her eyes, touching her muscles with a faint shiver of delight. She sank slowly to her knees, then twisted and stretched her young body until she lay full length in the sun. The world lay beneath her, the April sky bent and embraced her, the misty blue of a distant mountain peak held her eyes.

Far below, on the strip of road skirting the river, a young man rode, idly whistling, his roving eyes on tree, and rock, and river, the glint of sunlight on the wing of a bird, the streak of gray that shot across the road, a chipmunk darting from the bank above to the shelter of a rock at the river's edge. . . . The call came down to him, sweet, clear, alluring, searching up and down the hillsides across the river and coming back to him. He drew rein, and, throwing back his head, listened, his bold eyes eagerly scanning the hillside on his left. Its slope was steep, almost a sheer drop to the river,

the road on which he stood and a pile of rock alone separating it from the rush and gurgle of the water. The growth of oak, chestnut, and beech, just touched with the first budding green of spring, partially hid the view, but between their trunks the gray of overhanging rocks and the brown patches of winter leaves were visible.

Rutledge Ericson's quick eyes searched for the spot from whence had come that high-lilted call of the moment before; then he bent in his saddle, his face turned up that he might see to the very tops of the out-jutting boulders above him. The call came again, and he urged his horse forward a pace or two, still looking up. There was a parting here in the trees, and his glance travelled up the face of a huge rock, caught when it almost reached the summit by a bit of red that was well defined against the surrounding gray. It was a long distance above him, yet even at that distance he could distinguish the girl's figure; whether it was a child or a woman he could not determine.

Rutledge looked down for a doubtful moment at his horse, but the call came again, answered by the echo that gradually lost itself in the hills. It was not a child's voice, it was too full and deep-throated, too vibrant and searching; it was like a strain in music that sends a thrill along the spine, and brings a sensation of chill to the finger tips. At the first note it had touched Rutledge oddly. There had leapt up in him the desire to straighten in his saddle and answer in the full power of his lungs, and with every particle of will in his virile body. It was followed by a hint of caution, and the stirring of curiosity, the wish to hasten up the slope and come close to the bit of red.

He wheeled his horse from the road, plunged in behind the sheltering pile of rock, and dismounted. Here he was not fifteen feet from the river, close-hidden by a clump of young willows, to which he fastened his horse. He crossed the road

then quickly, looking up as he went to make sure of the position of the figure on the height above, and began his steep climb. The ground was so damp and slippery under its covering of winter leaves that climbing was difficult, doubly so because he was forced to turn and twist about among frequent boulders. Under the trees and with the shadows about him he was uncertain of taking the right direction, but he pushed on, finally striking a cow-path that wound in and out among the tree-trunks and rocks, but always leading upward.

He had climbed, it seemed to him, a long time, when the path led out into a space less steep and more clear of trees, and directly above him towered the mass of rock he was seeking. It jutted far out from the hillside, its front as clean cut as a slab of marble. At its summit were several ledges and irregular projections; it was on one of these ledges that he must have seen the bit of red. It was either gone now, or hidden from below by some projection, and Rutledge hastened to circle the rock, trying to find a path that might bring him up behind it. It was steep climbing, but by catching at undergrowth, and lifting himself over boulders, he succeeded in reaching higher ground.

He found himself on a shelf in the hillside that was almost on a level with the flat top of the rock. Rutledge walked out on it, then stood a few moments, panting and gathering breath to go on. His eagerness had no eyes for the view spread out beneath him, but he was conscious of the stinging pain in his hand. He had cut it during that impetuous climb. He paused now only long enough to knot his handkerchief about it, then hurried on, making his way to the edge of the rock, passing around detached fragments that looked as if it needed only a thrust to cast them roaring and crashing down the hillside.

Rutledge walked to the brink of the precipice, eagerly scanning the rough ledges beneath him, but it was only when

he had reached the very outermost thrust of the rock that he saw the object of his search. The girl was some ten feet below him, half kneeling, half lying on the ledge, her elbows propped on a rise in its surface, her chin in her hands. From where Rutledge stood he looked down on her back and a mass of dark hair that rested on her shoulders. Her hands hid her face, but her loose sleeves had slipped back, leaving her slender arms bare. A heavy mud-encrusted shoe showed from beneath her skirt. It and the make of her faded flannelette dress bespoke the country girl. Rutledge liked its red against the gray rock, but he began to smile a little now, wondering at the impulse that had hurried him up the hillside. Very probably she had been calling the family cow, and in an hour's time would be placidly milking it. It was always impulse that drove, and reality that disappointed him. He had heard a voice in the clouds that had called to him, drawing him slipping and plunging up the hillside to reach it, and he was rewarded by the sight of a muddy boot and an ill-washed gown. Its faded tint and the mass of tumbled black hair that rested upon it reminded him of the Odessan girls upon whom he had smiled, or the newly arrived immigrant of his own city, for Rutledge Ericson had the premature experience of a New York bred youth, overlaid by European wanderings.

He was fresh for adventure, eager as always to seize upon each new sensation, but he would not have climbed the hillside and torn his hands on the rocks for the sight of a peasant girl in faded red, with features as heavy, probably, as her shoe.

Still, he was master of the situation, such as it was, for he held the gate of the citadel; the only exit from the ledge below led within touch of his hand. When she wearied of her hard bed she would have to climb to his very feet, and he might extract some amusement from her surprise and subsequent conduct.

Rutledge seated himself, his eyes, smiling and watchful, fixed on the girl below. She lay quite motionless, however, and he looked away now and then at the view spread out beneath him. The hills were close drawn, but Rutledge sat at the apex of a projection and could look both up and down the river. At his right the river ran out between the hills to open country. Its foreground was cross cut by a long span of railroad bridge, stone arched and massive, guarded at one end by the small red-roofed station that clung to the strip of level cut for it out of the hillside. It stood at the junction of the Cumberland Mountain coal-road that wound along the other side of the river, and the main line that crossed the bridge.

As Rutledge looked, a long coal-train nosed its way from behind the station, twisting and curving with the river, panting on the steep up-grade; now it was visible, again it was hidden behind masses of rock, shrieking hoarsely as it passed beneath them, but it clung always to the river's edge and entered the gorge formed by the close-set hills on Rutledge's left. From where he sat he could look for miles up the throat of this gorge to the distant blue line of the Cumberlands. There were mountain streams that fed the river below, sending it foaming and tumbling in its eager way to the Chesapeake. There were boulders in the river, boulders everywhere, jutting out from the hillsides, standing like giant sentinels against the skyline of the hilltops, and on everything rested the pale green of early spring, sunned into brilliancy by an April sky.

Rutledge's eyes came back to the girl again, but she lay quite still. The sun was inclining toward a gap in the hills opposite, its level rays dazzling him; if he waited much longer it would be gone, and the gorge in shadow. Rutledge bent and dislodged a small stone, placing it on the edge of the rock directly above the girl, then touched it with the toe of his boot. It rolled and dropped to the ledge below, falling on the girl's foot. She moved instantly, turning her head to see

what had touched her, then looked up. At sight of her face the look of amusement died in Rutledge's eyes, and involuntarily his hand went to his cap.

"I am afraid I disturbed you," he said. "I am very sorry."

With a supple twist of her whole body, the girl drew herself into a sitting posture, meeting his curious and admiring look with one of wide-eyed amazement. The blood came into her cheeks, and her hand went for a startled moment to her breast.

"I frightened you," Rutledge repeated. "I'm awfully sorry."

She stared at him still, then said uncertainly, "I did not know there was any person—for miles." Her voice and enunciation were in keeping with the very evident refinement of her face, and Rutledge was immediately appreciative of it. He had undergone a mental somersault, but adjusted himself quickly.

"I don't believe that there is—no one but you and I. I left my horse down there on River Road, and climbed up here to—to try and find the top of this rock. There is a view from here, isn't there!" He was feeling his way, uncertain how to explain her, his regard both surprised and observant. He was leaning forward, his arm resting on his knee, his head bent to look down on her. There was an easy grace in his attitude, and an air of well-bred and perfect assurance. From the cut of his dark hair to the make of his riding-boots, he was typical of a world Esther had observed only from a distance, and her surprised look wavered into a downward glance of embarrassment as she drew her coarse shoe beneath her skirt.

"Yes—I often come here to see—it is so beautiful." Her voice was low, with more than a touch of accent, a something foreign in her method of speech that her embarrassment made

more apparent, and Rutledge recalled his impression of the moment before, a recollection evoked by the black of her heavy hair against the red of her gown.

"You live here then?" His smile was attractive.

She hesitated a moment, then pointed up the gorge. "Yes, up there—one long mile——" Again there was the rising inflection, and the pause on the last word. She looked up at him shyly, her embarrassment less evident. At that distance her eyes looked large and dark, and Rutledge thought that never before had he seen a face that was so definitely etched in black and white. The color in her cheeks was fading, and only her mouth showed red.

"I can't see the house from here," he said.

"No?—but I can from here." She stood up. "It is curious; from here I see four roofs—I do not count the station—but from up there one can see only the trees, the rocks, and the river." She bent her head farther back to look up at him, and he noticed the fulness of her throat and the glimpse of shoulder that the open collar of her dress revealed. "A few steps—it is curious the difference that they make." She lifted her hands and dropped them in an expressive gesture.

"They do—in lots of ways. May I come down there to see?" His voice was persuasive, his eyes still smiling.

"Yes—but this place—it is not so wide." She looked up at him gravely.

"It's wide enough for just two people," he returned, promptly. He rose at once and came down to her side, his quick eye and sure foot finding the projections that formed a series of natural steps. She stood with her back to the rock, and he stood close beside her, the look of admiration and curiosity growing in his face. She barely glanced at him, the color coming again in her cheeks, but she said nothing.

"The four roofs," he said, not taking his eyes from her

face, "where are they?" His voice, however, was matter of fact, and she answered him with her soft accent and quick outward gesture.

"The one—it is there, close by the river, below the station. Then do you see the two far beyond the bridge? You can see them through the arches. They are farms in the river-bottom."

"Yes, and the fourth?"

"It is up this way in the gorge—it is where I live."

"I don't see it."

"No? The red roof? There is just one little window, and a piece of roof—see? Maybe you must come a little this way to see—it is behind that pile of rock quite down by the river." She moved to the very edge to make room for him, and he put a warning hand on her arm.

"Yes, yes, I see now, but don't go so near the edge, it makes me dizzy to see you. It's more than a fifty-foot fall, that, and an everlasting roll afterwards—I've been up it and know." He laughed a little, his hand still on her arm. "Come and sit down," he urged. "If you live here you can tell me about the river—and things——"

"I can talk only a little for the sun goes down." She moved back from his hand. "You are a stranger then? . . . I thought maybe that you lived—perhaps—on Staunton Hill."

"I do—temporarily—but I am a stranger. I live in New York. And you—have you always lived here?"

"Always—almost—but I also have lived in New York."

Her manner had gained a touch of dignity that sat quaintly on her. She had seated herself on the last projection of the rude flight of steps, and Rutledge sat before her on the rise of rock against which she had been lying a short time before, his back turned to the view. He could judge of her much better now, and he studied her critically even while he

smiled at her odd manner of speech. She was under medium height, and very slender, but it was not a slenderness that suggested thinness, for her neck and arms were round, and her full bust was plainly visible beneath her curiously made blouse. The collar was cut low like a child's, and when she moved, or lifted her head, there was a gleam of white shoulder. Her gown was faded but clean, and Rutledge noticed that her hands, though showing unmistakable signs of work, were shapely and well cared for. Her face puzzled him. He was hardly prepared to call it beautiful, and certainly it could not be called pretty, it was too unusual. Her forehead was very low, the brows black, somewhat arched, and boldly marked, the eyes, long, white-lidded, and set wide apart. With the black of her brows and hair, and the creamy pallor of her skin, one would naturally expect to see black eyes, but they were light and changeable—gray, green, even warmly hazel, according to light and mood. The nose was straight, with delicate nostrils, the lips too full and red, and the chin well developed, though the wide set of the eyes detracted from its firmness. With black eyes and a more aquiline nose, the face might well have been Russian, possibly Jewish, but as it was it was unclassifiable. In repose it had an expressionless quiet that suggested oriental immobility. Yet the face was American, modern American, not colonial. It exemplified the blending of races, the conflicting of types; even the Anglo-Saxon showed in her eye, when its glance was gray and steadfast.

Rutledge did not make all of these observations, for though quick to receive impressions, he was not analytical. He decided that the girl before him was almost beautiful, and certainly entirely aside from any previous experience of his. She touched the quick of his curiosity and appealed strongly to the adventurous in him. She lost much of her air of shyness as she talked.

"I remember New York—a very little—from the time I was there as a child," she told Rutledge. "But I have been once since, and that time I remember better. Mr. Rieloff took me with him one year ago and we stayed for one week. The streets, and the people! Ach, and the noise!" She shrugged, her hands lifting. Then she smiled, and her face was on the instant transformed. There was a gleam of white teeth, a dancing light beneath half closed lids, and an upward curve to the corners of her mouth that with the faint tilt of her eyes made her expression elfishly provocative; it was mischievous yet appealing, that sudden smile of hers.

The youth in Rutledge laughed in answer to her smile. "You like it better here then?"

"Yes, for some things."

"Do your people live here?" he questioned.

"Yes, Mr. Rieloff, and his wife, they live here. Mr. Rieloff is my adopted father—I have no people of my own." Her smile faded as quickly as it had appeared.

Rutledge was a little awkward in the expression of his sympathy. "Is that so—that's hard luck. . . . But your—but Mr. Rieloff—what does he find to do in this deadly place? The only excitement I've heard of is fox-hunting."

"My father does not fox-hunt—he is not well," she said, with added gravity. "He used to be a professor—many years ago, and he is really a learned man, but now he does nothing—he cannot, he is too ill."

"That's hard luck," Rutledge repeated, "and for you too. What do you find to do all day down there by the river?"

"I?—I study, and I read, ah, a great deal! Then when Mr. Rieloff is feeling well enough I copy much for him, the things he has written—I look up references and do the many things he directs. I work also—I keep Mr. Rieloff's garden for him now he cannot. This is the dress I work in, and my shoes. I did not know I would meet—people—or I would

not have come like this." She touched her dress, glancing at him shyly again.

The childish note in her voice, and her quaint precision of speech, were irresistible, and Rutledge had a sudden desire to draw her over on his knee and kiss her. He wondered amusedly in just what form of speech she would rebuke him. Thoughts breed intimacy, though not so effectually, perhaps, as touch, and Rutledge answered her with a good deal of warmth, "You are beautiful in that red dress—I like it."

She frowned slightly, apparently ill-pleased. "The dress—it is ugly," she said, coldly. "It all ran away in the wash, and the shoes—they are terrible." Her pronunciation of "terrible" suggested an enormity. She shrugged, dismissing the subject, her voice grown soft again. "And now I should go, for the sun, see where it is."

She made a motion to rise, but Rutledge put out a detaining hand.

"Oh, please," he said, in his most persuasive tones. "You haven't even let me tell you my name yet."

"Or ask those many questions about the river." The corners of her mouth had lifted again, the gleam in her eyes apparent, though her manner was quite grave. "But I have so short a time."

Rutledge flushed, his look kindling. "Won't you tell me your name before you go?"

"Yes," she said, demurely. "It does not matter to me. My name is Hadassah Rieloff."

"Hadassah!" Rutledge exclaimed.

"You think it not so very beautiful then?" She smiled at him from under her lashes.

"It's odd—it sounds Turkish."

"No, it is the Hebrew for Esther, and it is really my name. The people who took me when I was little named me, but when Mr. Rieloff adopted me he liked best to call me Esther, so now I am Esther."

"I like Esther best too," Rutledge announced.

"Yes——?" she returned, with entire indifference. "Names do not, however, matter, for you are just only a stranger, and to-morrow you will be gone."

"Indeed I will not!" Rutledge exclaimed. "I meant that my home wasn't here. I'm living on Staunton Hill at Dr. Lorrimer's; he's coaching me, and I'll be here a long time—that is as long as I want to stay. Don't you know the Lorrimers?"

"No. I know where they live, but we do not know the people on Staunton Hill—well." She spoke with an access of dignity, and Rutledge knew perfectly what she meant.

"Staunton Hill is a small bit of the earth," he said, with contempt. "I'm sick to death of it. I didn't get through last year in college—I didn't behave myself well, to tell the truth, and everybody was upset over it, so I decided to come here where it is quiet and get tutored, and go in for examinations next fall. My mother made fun of me, she didn't want me to come here, she said I'd be tired of it in a week, but I've stuck it out for a month now. I don't know why I have except that I made up my mind I'd do it. I never was in a duller place in my life, but I like riding around, and I want to find if there are any trout in the river—fishing would give me something to do. You see I have to keep myself out of mischief." He spoke lightly.

She had listened to him with grave attention. "I thought you were too old to go to school—you looked to me so—so as if you had been everywhere."

He was young enough to be flattered by the remark, and laughed. "I am twenty-two and ought to be out of school, but they let me run around in Europe too long."

"Ah, you have been then a great deal in Europe?" Her smile lighted her face again.

"Every summer for three years, and nearly all of last year—I went around the world then."

Her long eyes widened. "How very much you must have learned! That is the thing I wish for most—to learn the very many things I do not know." She spoke wistfully.

He laughed again reminiscently. "I don't believe what I got out of it would do you much good."

She only sighed, giving him her lowered eyelids to study.

"Besides, you are so young—you have lots of time yet," he remarked. "Will you let me guess how old you are?"

As he had hoped, she gave him her wide look again. "If you wish it."

"I think you are sixteen?"

"No—I am older."

"Seventeen?"

"Not altogether."

"You mean 'not quite,' don't you?" Rutledge corrected, smiling. "You are not an American, I know."

She flushed scarlet either with anger or mortification. "Most certainly I am. You think I do not talk like an American?" She held her head high.

"No, no!" He hastened to apologize for his impertinence. "You speak so well—so much more correctly than most girls—most girls use such a lot of slang. Foreigners speak correctly—usually, as you do. I dare say your father taught you to speak so well—my speech got ruined at school."

"Yes—he taught me—always," she said, with a quick return to softness. "I will go up now."

"Let me go first and help you."

She stood aside to let him pass, and obediently gave him her hands when he reached down for them, but as she looked up into his face her eyes widened into their brilliant glance, her mouth mutinous. "I can climb quite well by myself," she said.

"Yes, but it's far nicer to be helped," he retorted. "There isn't a woman living who doesn't think so."

"You feel very sure when you speak like that," she replied, disdainfully.

"Perhaps because I know." He had drawn her up close beside him, answering her provocative glance with one ardent and masterful. He looked for a moment as if he would take her in his arms, but she drew back from him with a frightened catch in her breath, and he freed her hands at once. "Which way do you go down?" he asked.

"On this side," she replied, pointing to the left. "I go up a little, and then there is a path that leads down to the road. It is not so steep as on this other side. I go on then on the road till I come to my house."

"I'll go down with you—that is if I may?"

She looked troubled, and hesitated, but said finally, "To the road you can come—then you will go on to your horse."

He did not contradict her, but let her lead the way down the slope of the rock, and climbed with her to a point a little distance farther up the hillside. Here a well marked path led down to the road, a more gradual incline than the one Rutledge had climbed on his way up. They did not talk much, for under the trees and in the shadows of the rocks the light was already dim, and they had to go carefully. Rutledge led the way, turning frequently to assist his companion, but she refrained from any such remark as the one she had made a few moments before. He, on his part, was almost formal in his politeness.

They had gone some way in silence, when he asked her, "Does River Road go by your house?"

"It is near, but one cannot see for the rocks," she replied.

"I have ridden by—close to you then, more than once."

"You ride much on River Road?"

"Often. May I come in to see you the next time I pass?"

They had come almost to the road, and Rutledge turned to offer his hand for the last steep bit of slope.



"IT IS NEAR, BUT ONE CANNOT SEE FOR THE ROCKS," SHE REPLIED.

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"You give me always your left hand," she said, ignoring his question.

"My right hand is cut."

"Is that why you hold your handkerchief always in it? I noticed up there on the rock."

"Yes—I cut my hand when I climbed up the hill to find you."

They had come down now into the road and she had stopped.

"To find me?" she said, in surprise.

"Yes, you called to me, and I ran up the hillside to you." He spoke as simply stating a fact.

"I did not know that such a person lived—you mean to laugh at me."

"You called me—nevertheless," he insisted.

"How could I when I never knew you till this day? I saw no person in River Road—I would not call to them if I had." Her manner was earnest.

He laughed a little. "Of whom were you thinking then when you called, 'S-o-o come lee——'" He repeated the words in a half whisper, giving them their lingering inflection.

She was silent.

"Won't you tell me?" He bent in the gloom to see her face, but she would not look at him. "You were thinking of your lover."

"I have no lover," she said, flushing hotly. "It is impolite of you to ask like this—you have been impolite more than once."

"I know I am," he declared, half laughing, "but I want so much to know. Some day you will tell me."

"You always get, then, everything you wish?" Her tone was ironical. She started to walk on, then stopped. "I bid you good-night now."

"I do get pretty much what I want," he replied, decidedly,

"but I am coming with you as far as your house—that is if I may?"

"No, I think I would like you to go back to your horse."

"But it is growing dark, and you have a good bit to go yet," he objected.

"I would like for you not to come," she repeated, more firmly. "I am not afraid of the dark."

"Then of course I'll not come," he said, "but I am sorry I've made you angry. I really haven't intended to be rude; I am just interested—you're different from any one else."

"I am not angry—in the least," she declared.

"Then I may come in a few days to see you?" He came closer to her.

"No." Her voice was low.

"Oh, well, just as you like," he returned, shortly. "I'll say good-night then." He lifted his cap and turned away.

She stood a moment undecided, then said, softly, "If you will come back one little minute I will explain." He turned back to her at once, expectantly, and she continued, "I told you that my father he is not well? Mrs. Rieloff would be angry if I brought strangers to the house—she would be very angry if she saw you walk back with me—that is why I say no."

"Oh—then—it is not because you don't want to see me. . . . Won't you come some time to the rock up there then?"

"I go up there—not very often."

"Please, Miss Esther."

"I do not even know your name." In the dimness he caught her smile.

"I told you—no, I didn't. It's Rutledge Ericson, and Dr. Lorrimer is sponsor for my character—he was a professor too, you know, like Mr. Rieloff." He was half laughing, his voice pleading. "Come to see the sunset—to-morrow evening?"

"I am very busy for three days." She moved away quickly.

"Please! Friday, then, it's my lucky day?"

"Shall I ask the clouds for it not to rain on that day——?" There was again the pause and questioning inflection on the last word that disappeared with her into the dimness.

CHAPTER II

RUTLEDGE was uncertain whether his lady of the rock would keep her appointment, consequently during the next three days he thought of her much more frequently than he would otherwise have done, the things that were calculable rarely having attraction for him. He rode every day on River Road, and accurately located Esther Rieloff's house. It was well hidden by a pile of boulders as she had said. There was no other house within two miles of it, and Rutledge wondered what Esther's life must be with only the rocks and river for company.

On the second day after his meeting with her he passed a woman on the road whom he took to be Mrs. Rieloff, and after looking into her common face and hard eye he wondered still more how Esther came by her air of refinement; certainly not from contact with Mrs. Rieloff. The woman had a claim to good looks, but it was not of Esther's elusive type. He was glad that his picturesque lady of the rock was not her daughter.

Rutledge had taken pains to question neighborhood report, and learned that Mr. Rieloff was a German, and an unusually well educated man. He had come into the neighborhood when Esther was only a child, and she had grown up in almost absolute seclusion, for apparently Mr. Rieloff was poor and chose to live as a recluse. He had never sent Esther to school, but had taught her himself; up to the time of his marriage she had been his only companion. It was no secret that she was only an adopted child, yet his devotion to her had been perfect.

Rutledge could not learn why the old man had chosen to bury himself in that quiet place, nor could any one account

for his recent marriage to a woman who was evidently not of his own class. When his health had begun to fail, he had gone to New York and brought this woman back with him to serve as his nurse and housekeeper. Later on he had married her. For some time his mind had been failing and Esther probably gave the right explanation of his marriage when she said to Rutledge in her quaint way, "I think maybe it was just a strangeness. I think she frightened him, or persuaded. It is an illness of the mind he has, and it makes him like a child very often, and at other times he is strange. He is very strange now and Mrs. Rieloff must stay with him all the time."

She did not tell Rutledge this until she had talked with him several times, and the tears rose in her eyes as she spoke. "I love him very much—he has been really my father. Mrs. Rieloff, she has never liked me, but until she married my father and he has grown more ill, she would never say so. Now she says so often. I have no place now in his house. That is the reason you must not come there—there are no young men who come to our house. She would make much trouble for me if she knew for one little minute that I knew you."

She did come to the rock on Friday afternoon, and Rutledge made further acquaintance with her. He could not persuade her to stay long for she proved more elusive and distant than on his first meeting, but he won a promise to come again, and still again. During the next two weeks they wandered together over the hills and up and down the gorge, culling the joy of Spring, for the early flowers were blooming in the hollows, and the dogwood and honeysuckle were in full bud on the hillsides. They gathered handfuls of violets, anemones, and bloodroot, leaving them to wither on some sun-warmed rock where they stopped to rest and talk. Esther knew every secret place of beauty, every rock-cave and deepest

pool in the river, and for some time Rutledge rambled about with her with much of the healthy enjoyment of a boy. It was the entire novelty of his companion that attracted him, and her quaint dignity that held him in check. She was so curious a mixture of almost infantile candor and primitive astuteness, so quaint a combination of ignorance and purely book-instilled knowledge, that Rutledge, who possessed but a small share of imagination, was given pause, agape for the time with surprise, and quite unable to explain her.

He had been bred in cities, and being the product of artificial surroundings, was lacking both in sentiment and fancy. For the moment Esther pleased him vaguely much as did the perfect woodland beauty around them. For a fifth of his short life Rutledge had been expending his superabundant animalism on some woman or other who was his superior in experience, and now to be led about in entire seclusion by a girl who was half a child, and who apparently knew as much of the world as Dr. Lorrimer's five-year-old daughter, was for Rutledge Ericson a situation too entertaining to be rashly disturbed.

As yet her merely feminine attraction had not so forcibly appealed to him as to arouse an impetuosity that always made for its goal entirely regardless of obstacles or consequences. Then, too, Esther succeeded in eluding his love-making and avoiding threatening crises with a skill that a woman of his world might have envied. She brought to her aid a certain dignity, coupled with natural tact and childish appeal, which proved effective against his occasional lapses. She diverted him completely, and he was content to dally amusedly with the present.

One manifestation of Esther proved vastly entertaining to Rutledge: hitherto, his interest in literature had been confined to the daily paper, and the titillation of the latest novel,

his knowledge of the classics being limited to a slight currying of college training, and a real interest in the histories of Don Juan, Tom Jones, and the like, in entertaining parts of the Old Testament, and the Decameron. He found Esther's erudition extremely amusing, and her fanciful remarks attractive. She appeared to know Mr. Rieloff's somewhat antiquated library by heart, though she complained to Rutledge with a sigh that she did not understand Schopenhauer at all, and confessed with her sudden smile that she liked best the histories and stories that had much love in them. She persistently eluded his assistance—for the desire to lay hands on her was growing in him—and climbing with the grace of a squirrel to some seat well out of his reach, she would gravely deliver herself of her amusing jumble of impressions. It was her method of entertaining him, the only conversation she knew, and while she watched his surprised interest, the feminine youth in her was warmly conscious of the demand that lay in his look.

"Mr. Rieloff has no religion at all—I mean no Christian religion," she told Rutledge, one day, from the top of a rock upon which she had barricaded herself, "and yet he is a very kind, good man in his heart. Since his illness he talks much of personal irresponsibility, and he says strange things that I do not understand. I cannot see why if we are only just little bits of animated dust, and will go right back to the earth again, what difference it makes what we do. Mr. Rieloff seems to think we will do them any way—we are kept going by some great law. . . . I suppose if a person is made in the first place of horrid black earth like Mrs. Rieloff, they will be hateful as she is. Or if they are of clean white sand like Mr. Rieloff, they will be good—that it is all arranged beforehand, and whatever one decides to do is the thing he will do anyhow. . . . I wish I understood—many things," and she sighed.

Rutledge had learned not to smile at such remarks. "Heavens," he returned, "does Mr. Rieloff talk that kind of stuff all the time?"

She sighed again, her brows knitted in distress. "Yes, he and Mr. Pemberton used to talk for long hours in French; Mr. Rieloff speaks French and German to me more than English—so I can understand easily, and I would listen very carefully, but their beliefs are all mixed up in my mind. I cannot make out if Mr. Rieloff is entirely a believer in evolution—I think perhaps he has been so unhappy that all beliefs are a tangle to him, and he has found comfort in none. Mr. Rieloff talks much of morality, and Mr. Pemberton, I think, does not believe in morals at all. He says that morals are ephemeral conventions superinduced by transient necessity, which means I suppose, that it doesn't matter whether you are good or not, for in a little while there will be another fashion in goodness. He himself is a great painter, and he says that the artist that possesses a moral sense is a terrible degenerate. He says that religion is nothing but an intoxication, like art, or alcohol, that all life is merely a series of intoxications. It is very troublesome, sometimes, all this wisdom of theirs. I think I should just like to have a simple knowledge which I could question when I am in doubt, and from which I could have a simple answer, 'Yes,' or 'No.'"

Esther's precise enunciation of this speech was pure joy to Rutledge. He had turned purple, but succeeded in controlling his laughter, for he had learned that she was very sensitive about her accent. He had laughed at her once, and she had refused to see him for two days; that was a disaster not to be courted. When he was able to speak his answer was characteristic: "I don't bother my head about such things, my little Lady. Do whatever you please, get all you can out of life, and let the rest slide—that's my religion. Whose business is it anyway? Youth and money

are the two best things in the world, and as long as one has them why worry?"

But Esther was accustomed to analyze creeds. "Your own will you think, then, is the highest law? That is a very comfortable belief. I have the youth but not the money to do as I please with. If I had the money I should go all about the world as you have, and fill my head full of things to remember. . . . Ah, think of that, only!" She studied him musingly, through half closed eyes.

"Collecting remembrances is fun enough," he returned, with a grimace, "but it's better to lose them as soon as possible."

She observed him gravely. "I do not like you when you speak like that," she declared.

"How do you like me to speak?" he inquired, more than half seriously. "I can't talk such rot as that great artist whose speeches you were repeating a little while ago." He looked up at her, his dark face alight. "Now I don't mind in the least what *you* talk about because your lips are red no matter what you choose to say. When you are serious your eyes grow wide and I find myself wondering what color they are, and if you smile there are a dozen things about you that are lovely all at once, your eyes, your mouth, the dimple in your cheek. . . . Let me come up there by you, my little Lady, and I'll tell you a thousand things about you that I love—" He scrambled up to her, but on the instant she was well beyond his reach.

"You speak very great nonsense," she declared, from her new position of safety, "and since you can say nothing that pleases me to-day, I will go home." This was always her method of showing disapproval and from previous experience he knew that she would do what she threatened. As yet his determination was not sufficiently aroused, and he compromised as usual.

"Oh, don't go away. I'll talk about anything in the world you want me to."

"I like best to hear you describe to me the places where you have been, and the peoples," and he was endlessly questioned about the world of which Esther knew nothing, its gayeties, its interests, its meaning, but above all the history of every being whose name Rutledge ever mentioned. With the instinct of the true story teller she required first a background, and then demanded a history for the setting she had evoked, and while he talked and she questioned and listened, she studied his features, eyes, lips, the strength and beauty of him, more shyly than he looked upon her, but none the less absorbedly.

He was a strange and disquieting presence in her world, a being who looked commandingly upon her, and at the same time submitted to her will. She was quivering with eagerness to venture upon life, and oppressed by a great timidity. An older man would have understood her; Rutledge did not understand her in the least, but that in no way detracted from her charm. A perfervid imagination and an entire ignorance of life would have correctly defined Esther at this period, but Rutledge was as incapable of the definition as he was of discovering the character that lay beneath her peculiar effervescence of youth. To him she was simply quaint, unusual, and amusing as well as alluring; she pleased him greatly—that was all that was necessary. He was of those who take cognizance only of their own desires.

CHAPTER III

It was on a bright morning some three weeks after their first meeting that Rutledge took his way down the gorge. It was his usual before-luncheon ride which now always led him by Esther's house, for the fact that she had forbidden him an entrance had for him almost as much fascination as the probability of seeing her red gown in the garden. He had discovered that from a certain place in the road it was possible to see Mr. Rieloff's carefully tended flower-beds.

On this particular morning he was suddenly halted in his lazy meditations by the deep tones of a man's voice, and following it Esther's soft accent. He drew rein at once, and glancing up to his left, saw two figures walking along the top of the bank some few yards beyond him. The man was talking earnestly and rapidly, and when they were opposite the Rieloff house they stopped and stood for a time facing each other, the man's hand on Esther's arm. The bank here overhung the road, a drop of some feet. The man jumped it lightly, and turning held up his arms for Esther. Rutledge saw her hesitate a moment, then with a graceful sidewise movement avoid the outstretched arms, and spring like an alighting bird down into the road.

Rutledge recognized the manoeuvre, and felt though he could not see the dancing light that lay beneath her lowered lashes. The flush of intense irritation that rose to his temples deepened into an angry red as he watched the two cross the road and take the path that led up to the Rieloff house. So he was only allowed the privilege of stolen interviews, while some one else went in and out openly. Just why this should anger him he did not stop to consider, for certainly the fact that Esther accorded him the privilege argued

a partiality for himself, only it had never before occurred to him to look upon it in that light. Still for some reason it did anger him thoroughly. This man was young and slender, that much he could see, though he could not distinguish his features. He remembered Esther's soft, "There are no young men who come to our house." This man not only entered her house, but his manner expressed intimacy, the clasp of her arm was a greater favor than Esther had ever allowed him.

The incident in some way changed his conception of her, made her more like others. She had appeared so much of a child to him; she suddenly emerged a woman. Women were all pretty much the same any way, and not over-scrupulous as to veracity. Of late she had persistently evaded his own uplifted arms, and insisted upon doing her climbing without his help, but that was of course a bit of coquetry on her part. Even while he scowled over the incident he felt a new eagerness to see her.

Rutledge did not get the better of his anger before his meeting with Esther that afternoon. It had settled into sullenness, for the prick of jealousy was still smarting, and he thought of her now with an interest that had its root in what was worst in him. He had slipped the bridle from inclination, which would in time give head to his recklessness.

Esther came up the hillside to him swinging her hat by its strings, and humming softly to herself, her eyes alight, her lips parted, her whole mien one of subdued happiness. Rutledge had never seen her wear just that expression, for in spite of her quick gestures her look and manner, except when she smiled, were the reverse of animated. He marked it with a sharper prick of jealousy, though the beauty it brought to her face stirred his pulse. As soon as he saw her on the path below, he went to meet her.

"You're late, my Lady," he complained.

"I could not come sooner, though I hurried very much." She was a little breathless, but she declined to see his outstretched hand. His face darkened, and despite her air of inattention she observed it. They climbed slowly up the twisted path, and Rutledge kept a frowning silence. She stole a look at him, then asked persuasively, "Would you like to see my pine-needle parlor?"

"If it's not too far and we can sit down and talk."

"You feel, then, conversational——?" She glanced again at him, her air grave, her eyes a gleam.

Rutledge could not forbear a smile at her choice of the long word, though he was none the less annoyed; he knew that it was her intention to divert him, and his frown immediately deepened.

"Very much so," he returned, coldly, keeping his regard steadily upon her as they climbed.

She sighed faintly, like a troubled child, and walked on by his side without lifting her eyes. To Rutledge's newly awakened interest she appeared beautiful. She was not wearing her red dress, but a light muslin with a scattered pattern of pansies and green leaves. It was cheap material, such as one sees in a country store, but it had been made and fitted with care, showing well the swell of bust, the graceful lines of waist and curve of hip. The obnoxious boots were also wanting—Rutledge had never seen them since the first day—and the plain, low-cut shoes were small though poor in make. The green in her dress made her eyes look quite gray, and either the steep climb or some emotion had brought the color to her cheeks. Her face was striking at all times, but color made her really beautiful. She was as young, and soft, and lovely, as the bud of wild honeysuckle at his knee, and a slight shiver the meaning of which he knew, touched him lightly. The warm, quickening breath of growing things was on his cheek, and in his nostrils the scent of young leaves opening

to the sun; but for anger he might yield himself to the purely sensuous impression of the moment. Esther was his discovery; it suddenly appeared to him that he had always looked upon her as his possession, yet another walked with her whenever he pleased; his look grew black.

Esther felt this look though she did not see it, and half way up her steps flagged. She chose a tree to lean upon. "I think to-day it is wearisome," she remarked. "The hills are all such a long way up."

In his twenty-two years Rutledge had never endeavored to hide any emotion that held him. "I daresay you walked too much this morning," he answered, curtly.

Esther's immobility of feature served her well, and her eyes were still lowered, but her speaking hands were alive and lifted. "Ach, Mr. Pemberton, yes! You saw us then. He wished me to go with him up the river to the house in which he used to live—he had left there some things he wished to get. Yet we did not walk far." She glanced at him, a look that would have been openly mischievous had it not been so grave.

"Pemberton! I thought he was an old man, Mr. Rieloff's friend? The man I saw with you was young," Rutledge said, sharply.

Esther shook her head in perfect gravity. "You could not have been near then for Mr. Pemberton is not young. At a little distance you could not tell, but he is quite gray."

"He's as light on his feet as I am," Rutledge declared, with rising anger. "I saw him jump down that bank by your house, and he went on in with you. You told me that men did not come to your house—I suppose you forgot him. I don't know why, but I've had a sort of feeling all along that you'd never say a thing that wasn't true, but you are just like every other girl I've known."

She dared a little farther, meeting his flaming eyes now.

"I suppose you have known very many other girls, and told them also that they were beautiful."

This was carrying the war into his own territory, and gave him sudden pause. Then he met it boldly. "Of course I have known 'many girls.' Every man knows 'many girls,' but he may forget every one of them, forget he ever saw them even, in a week's time."

She received the implication with an access of color, but maintained her air of indifference. "It seems also that a man may be very angry for no reason whatever with his friend of a week's time."

"Oh, confound it, Esther," Rutledge exclaimed, with a sudden change to exasperated pleading, "tell me that man is your lover and stop playing with me! I told you the first night I saw you that you were thinking of your lover up there on the rock—I knew it."

"I never talk to people who are angry. . . . I am afraid of them—I go very quickly home."

Rutledge drew a long breath. "I'm not angry, my little Lady." He was new to self-control, but just now he could not risk losing her.

She looked at him still gravely, then the corners of her mouth suddenly lifted. "If you are not angry then I speak only the truth to you. Mr. Pemberton is not my lover. He lived for two summers in a cottage at the top of the hill above our house, and he and Mr. Rieloff were great friends because both could talk so wisely. It was three years ago that he lived here, and I was not grown up then, but he was always kind to me. He taught me how to draw because he said I had talent, and he told me often that when I became a woman and had lived, he would paint my face; that he does not care to paint a face that does not show the lines of suffering. I have seen some of his little sketches of wretched women and I hope he may never paint me. That is all Mr. Pember-

ton is—just Mr. Rieloff's friend whom we have not seen for three years." She was smiling openly at him now.

Rutledge's face cleared, but he was not entirely convinced. "He made love to you this morning," he insisted. "I know from the way he held up his arms to you there at the bank."

Esther flushed scarlet. "Since you have taught me, I think all men say nonsense to women," but there was a trace of anxiety as well as decided discomfort in the confession.

"He did make love to you then, and he will again," Rutledge said, quickly. "He can see you whenever he wants to, and I have to be shut out."

Esther's smile appeared again. "Do you fear him if he is so far away as France?"

"France?"

"He is already on his way—he had only two hours here on River Road."

"Why didn't you tell me that in the beginning?" Rutledge exclaimed, in sudden relief.

"Because I do not like angry people."

"Esther, you're the sweetest thing on earth!" but she was already beyond his reach.

"You wish me then to go home?" she asked.

"I do not, indeed!"

"Perhaps then you behave very differently."

"I will," he promised, his eyes alight, and they continued their climb in silence, but both were flushed by the intimacy of the first quarrel. The call of Spring was alive in Rutledge again, warming him to his finger tips, and the color remained vivid in Esther's cheeks.

She led him up almost to the crown of the hill and pointed out a group of pines. In the centre was a saucer-like depression, where the pine needles had collected to form a deep, soft mat. There was the inevitable rock at its edge against which they could lean as they sat, and the interlocked

branches of the pines to shade them from the May sunshine. It was a seductive spot, cool and sweet scented, and well suited to Rutledge's new mood.

Esther sat against the rock, and Rutledge stretched himself at full length on the bed of pine needles at her side. It was a yielding on her part, this granting of his proximity, and she stole a shy glance at his long figure and the back of his close cropped head. He had laid his cheek against the pine needles for a moment, so she could see his profile. It was a handsome face, clear in outline and rich in coloring, black-browed and masterful. He had not lived long enough or hard enough yet for the lines about his mouth to be noticeable, but their indications were already there. She paled a little because of the sudden flutter of her heart; suppose he had remained angry with her, and left her? The rocks, the sunshine, the river, all nature had taken on a different coloring since he had answered to her vague call and clambered up the hillside to her.

Her eyes were wide, the faint shadows beneath them more marked, when he lifted to his elbow and turned to look up at her.

"They are sweet," he said, of the pine needles. "Why didn't you bring me here before, Esther, instead of keeping me climbing over rocks all day?"

"I was saving it."

"Why?" He drew closer, until he touched her.

"Because I love it best of all the places—the Mōnies live here."

"What are the Mōnies, my Lady?"

"The little people who live under the ground like the dwarfs in 'das Rheingold.' The Lord made the middle of the earth, and the caves, and the inside places first, and made a little people that must live there and watch over the gold and precious stones that were heaped up in the centre of the

earth. Then they grew wicked among themselves, and because the Lord was very busy making the outside of the world beautiful, and forgot to watch them, they stole the gold and precious stones, and hid them away in rocks and secret places. That is why now people must dig so hard to find them. When the Lord had time to look again into the centre of the earth, it was all gone. Then He was very angry, and turned the little people into Mōnies, scattering them all over the earth. He commanded them to live always in the ground, and only to come up to the light when they are called. They like to live near pine trees, for there is always sand for them to dig their little holes in."

He laughed up at her. "That's a pretty tale, Esther. Who told it to you?"

Her full lips parted in their instant smile. "No person. I told it to myself, because they will not come out of their holes unless you whisper just one name to them, and they will not go back unless you call them 'Jack.'"

"What nonsense!"

She glanced down at him, her look quite grave again. "It is altogether true—that. If I wish to call the Mōnies up I must kneel down and put my mouth to the hole, and say, so, 'Mōnie, Mōnie, come out your hole,' and in a few little minutes the sand at the top of the hole shakes, and up comes a being like a little gray beetle, and falls about in the sand as if it were blind. Then you must say, 'Go back, Jack, go back, Jack!' and it will rush into its hole, but it will not go for any other name. . . . I will go and call him if you like, and you will see I tell the truth."

His flushed look was on her smiling lips. "No," he said, "I don't want anybody about here but ourselves. . . . Do you?" He reached for her hand, and held it, laying his face against it. She tried to draw it away, but he held it tightly, and when she let it lie in his, he turned it up and

softly kissed the palm. It was the first caress she had allowed, but the spell of Spring was on her as well. She was silent, her lashes down, and he looked up at her, repeating more softly, "Do you? . . . Esther?"

She made him no answer but silence.

He studied her averted face for a time, the blood rising slowly to his temples and swelling the veins in his forehead. Then lifting himself suddenly he caught her to him, his face bent to hers. "Esther," he whispered, in her ear, "love me a little!"

She drew back against the rock with a startled intake of breath, struggling to escape his clasp, but he held her. "Kiss me," he said, through his teeth, "you *must*." Then his voice dropped to pleading. "My little Lady, I love you so!"

She shook in his arms. "I do not know that you love me—you must let me go—you hurt me."

"I do love you," he said, in smothered tones. "You know I do. I want you more than anything else in the world."

He bent her head back against his shoulder, unmindful of her struggle and protest until his lips found hers, pressing them, clinging to them, till they parted in a choking sob, and she lay still in his arms. He raised his head then, looking down at her, his eyes flaming, his brows lifted, the moment of mute questioning, of hesitancy in face of innocence.

Esther did not move in his arms, for she could not, but her eyes dilated, and dark with terror, met his wild look, fascinated, then beseeching, imploring, drowned by the great tears that gathered and brimmed in them. Her chin quivered like a hurt child's, and the strangling sob rose again in her throat. "Rutledge——"

His arms lost their grip, and with a groan he dropped his head in her lap, and she sat quite still, looking down on his

shaking shoulders. They were quiet for so long that a bird flew close to them, alighting on the pine needles only a few feet away, and presently its mate twittered and fluttered, dropping beside it.

Rutledge moved at last, and raised his head, and Esther put her hand on the rock, helping herself to stand upright, then turned to go.

Rutledge got to his feet. "Esther," he said, thickly, "don't go."

She went on without answer, walking more quickly.

He was after her at a stride, his hand on her arm, but she shrank from him, her eyes wide again with fright. "You will please not hold me," she said, distinctly. "I wish to go."

"Esther, stay a minute and listen!" he begged. He was white now.

She lifted her hands, palms outward, a gesture of intense distress. "No, no, nothing could persuade me to stay! You have hurt me terribly. . . . How could you——" Her voice was lost.

He winced perceptibly. "Very well, say what you please to me, I deserve it," he said, in a low voice, "but remember to take a small part of the blame to yourself."

"In what am I to blame?" she asked, with quivering lips.

He made no answer, only looked at her.

"Because I come when you ask me——?" Her voice dropped on the words, her eyes wavering under his steady regard. She was crimson now with shame, her hands twisting. "Well, then, I come no more," she said, indistinctly, and turning, fled down the hill.

Rutledge sprang after her. "Esther, for heaven's sake come back!" he called, but she sped on. Then he stood on the bit of path below the pine knoll, and watched her go.

"Oh, the devil! The *devil!*" he said, in passionate disgust. "But what *will* I do now?"

CHAPTER IV

THREE days passed, and Rutledge spent them to all appearances much as usual. He retired and rose again, ate, gave four unsatisfactory hours daily to his tutor, and rode up and down River Road, but there was no climb among the rocks, no lingering about in the sunshine, no Esther.

The first twenty-four hours passed in a more or less poignant sense of self-disgust; the second in active dissatisfaction and a depression of spirits that settled gradually into an all-pervading physical discomfort, a steadily increasing inward ache. From the time Rutledge Ericson had first been able to yell lustily, he had been subject to the ailment that now laid its grip upon him. In its first stages it might be diagnosed as, "*I want*," and in its culmination as, "*I will have*."

On the third day Rutledge wrote a letter that contained an apology and a plea, carrying it himself to the red-roofed station beyond the bridge; later on in the day he learned that it had been delivered. He hung about River Road, idled by the river, spent an afternoon on the great rock, the place he had assigned in his letter, a restless twelve hours without relief. Then he wrote more urgently than before, and again he waited, finally taking up his watch before Esther's door. In all the long hot afternoon he saw only Mrs. Rieloff go in and out.

At last, in late evening, the front door opened, and Esther came out to the porch, but at sight of him she turned a white face and hurried into the house. Rutledge reached the porch only to hear the key grate in the lock. He turned on his heel then, and, swearing long and passionately in his anger, went home.

At midnight of that night he rose from a burning bed and penned a few lines that were vivid with passion and humility, for he had reached desperation, and offered all he had to give. Then he waited through another sickening day, only to receive a typewritten envelope enclosing his own letters; they had been opened, but were returned to him without comment.

Rutledge spent such a night as only the passionate and wilful can know, and came down to breakfast with his hand-bag packed. "I'm off to New York for a couple of days," he announced, shortly, and Mrs. Lorrimer watched him go with a feeling of sympathy for his mother when he should think fit to present himself to her. Rutledge was not the only rich man's son Mr. Lorrimer had coached, so she was thoroughly well acquainted with the type; Rutledge's college career was no secret. She knew the possibilities that lay in his sullen look, and neither she nor her husband had any expectation of his return to the quiet of Staunton Hill; the astonishing thing was that he had remained so long.

Rutledge spent the next four days in New York, though he did not trouble to tell his mother why he came, or what he was doing with his time. She appraised his mood, shrewdly, as usual, and asked no questions. To a young fellow of his acquaintance who found him scowling over a cocktail at the club he was a little less taciturn.

"Hello!" said his acquaintance. "When did *you* get back?"

"Three days ago."

"Going to stay?"

"I'm damned if I know."

"Where have you been, anyway?"

"Improving my mind and my morals in the country."

"Oh, rot!"

"Quite true. I assure you."

"Well, cut loose for a while now."

"It's what I've been doing for the last three days—or trying to; I'm debating a return to mathematics—and morality."

"Well, drop it and come to dinner—we'll go to Fitchie's afterwards."

"No, thanks," shortly.

His acquaintance studied him in silence for a moment. "What's the matter, Ericson?" he asked.

"Just that I can't have, 'what I want when I want it.'"

"Huh," laughed the other as he passed on, "that's a common enough complaint!"

Two elderly men who were seated nearby caught the remark, and glanced at the speaker, then smiled at each other.

"Who is he, Burnham?" asked the larger of the two.

"Young Ericson, Rutledge Ericson."

"Not Bland Ericson's son!"

"Yes."

"Is he!" The stout man looked at Rutledge interestedly. "A handsome boy, but hard to hold, I'll wager."

"He is that," the other said with emphasis.

"Not vicious, though, Burnham; he's got too clear an eye. He hasn't his father's look about him."

"No—vicious is not the word for him," said the smaller man. "He's likable, even when he's bent on upsetting the universe."

The next morning found Rutledge back again on River Road, riding his horse at a steady canter. He wore his cap pulled well down over his eyes, and in the shadow of its visor his cheeks looked pale.

He halted when he reached the pile of rock beside the Rieloff house and dismounted. Then leaving his horse at the roadside he turned up the path that led to the house, moving

quickly and decidedly. The path skirted the rocks and led around to the other side, then across the strip of brilliant garden to the house, a small story-and-a-half structure, steep-roofed and brown-shingled, with a low, vine-covered porch.

Rutledge stopped for a moment at the rock, glancing over the house, the porch, and the garden, in search of observers, but there was no one in sight; save for the ever present sound of the river, it was so still that he could hear distinctly the hum of the bees in the bed of petunias nearby.

As he waited, a door at the rear of the house opened, and a tall woman came out with a pail in her hand and disappeared round the house. Rutledge reached his decision instantly; he came quickly from behind the rock and took the path that led up to the front door. He had noticed that it was half open, so stepping lightly on the porch he was able to come close and look in. The door opened into a large room that was evidently both library and living room; there was a comfortable fireplace, a wide couch, a centre-table with a work-basket, and on it Esther's hat, and a large paper-littered desk at the window. The room was lined with bookshelves, almost from ceiling to floor, and near the desk were yet more books piled on revolving bookcases. On the couch lay a white-haired old man, and seated close to him was Esther, her head bent over some sewing. She sat with her back to him, so he could not see her face, but Rutledge had a distinct impression of the old man's features. He was beetle-browed and eagle-nosed, with hollow cheeks and prominent chin, and even as he lay, his body gave the impression of being stooped. His eyes were closed, his hands clasped on his breast, the long fingers pointing upward, and in the few moments of waiting before he knocked, Rutledge saw that they twitched incessantly.

He did not knock loudly, but Esther heard and turned about at once. At sight of him she rose to her feet with a

gasp, her face grown dead white. She stood apparently incapable of speech or movement, and the old man's voice came sharply, "Who is it, Esther? I cannot see."

He had raised himself on the couch, his shaking hand clutching her dress, his brilliant eyes turned on Rutledge, but apparently not yet focussed on him. Esther answered then, her voice low and husky in its softness, "A stranger to you, dearest; lie down again." She had put her hands on his shoulders to push him back when his shifting look suddenly gained purpose, and dragging at her skirt he stood unsteadily on his feet, pointing with a shaking finger, his flaming eyes on Rutledge's face.

"So she has sent you at last," he said, slowly and with bitter emphasis. "She has sent you at last, a suppliant to my door!" His voice rose wildly, "Go, I have no place for her now—begone! She has wrung my heart between her two hands until it beats no more. Go feed with your swine—wallow in your own mire—go—go I say!" He took one step forward, his clenched hands raised above his head, his cry rising high and shrill, like the scream of a demented woman, "Aigh!" He staggered and swayed, dropping his hands to his head and clasping it convulsively, then sank a crumpled heap on the floor.

Rutledge stood for a moment too shocked to move, but Esther was at the old man's side, murmuring to him, trying to lift him, and he went to her aid. Together they put him on the couch, where he lay moaning and turning his head from side to side like one in agony.

Esther bent over him, wringing her hands. "What shall I do!" she gasped, "Ah, what shall I do!" She turned on Rutledge, then. "You must go before he sees you—ah, go! If he becomes more strange I cannot hold him—only Mrs. Rieloff can—but she may also come at any moment and see you. Go, I beg of you!"

"I can't leave you alone with him, Esther," he exclaimed.

"It is not so bad as for you to stay—I beg of you——"
There was the sound of an opening door and footsteps, and Esther caught his arm in her urgency. "She comes now—Rutledge, I ask you for my sake——"

"Yes, yes, I'll go—now you're not alone with him, but, Esther, I've *got* to see you—I'll come again if you don't come to me. I only want to talk to you for ten minutes."

"I will come, yes."

"If you don't want her to see me, I'll wait out there behind that rock—I'll wait one hour, or two, or three, till you do come—but *you must come.*"

"I promise you—only go!"

Rutledge turned to the porch, and as he closed the door behind him he caught a woman's sharp tones and Esther's muffled answer.

"Are they every one of them mad!" he exclaimed angrily to himself. "God, that old man! How he looked, and what a scream! Think of being shut up with him and that beast of a woman."

Rutledge stood or walked about in the shade of the rock for a long hour before Esther came to him. She was still very pale, and trembling, but she spoke first, even before she reached him.

"We must not talk here," she said. "It is too near. We must go down by the river," and turning before he could answer, she hurried down the bank to the very edge of the water. There was a narrow strip of ground here, and following it up until the bank rose steep behind them, and the overhanging branches were dense, she stopped and faced him. "I am here—now what would you say to me?"

The blood came into his face. "Esther, why do you speak like that! A few days more like the last week, and I think I should shoot myself, or go mad like that old man up there."

Her voice softened. "I do not mean to speak harshly, but I am in very great difficulties—you do not know everything——"

"I know some of it, darling. I saw how it was this morning." His manner was tender now. He took her hand and held it. "Come and sit down here—on the log."

She obeyed him as if in her trouble she was only half conscious of what she did. When they were seated she drew her hand from his, and he was too fearful of her displeasure to retain it, but he bent and kissed it before he let it go. She laid her other hand over it, holding it tight-clasped in her lap, her eyes, large with unshed tears, fixed on his. Her eyelids were swollen as from weeping in the night, and the pallor of her face made her mouth look unnaturally red.

She spoke hurriedly. "Why do you make me come here? I do not know at all what I shall do, and you make me worse trouble."

"Esther!"

"It is quite true. Yesterday Mr. Rieloff was, oh, so very ill, and Mrs. Rieloff must tie him even,"—she shivered,—
"and the doctor came and they say he must go now to an asylum. For a long time I have been afraid they would say it."

"But it would be the best thing for him, Esther."

Her lips quivered. "Perhaps so—my poor father—and I!"

"Certainly it would. Both you and Mrs. Rieloff would be better off if he were where he is safe and looked after."

"It may be better for her—I do not know—but it will not be for me."

"What do you mean?"

"As long as he is here she cannot drive me away, but when he goes——"

"Drive you away! You mean she'd turn you out? Why

the woman must be a devil!" . . . He hesitated, observing her intently. "But what difference does it make what she does, you don't have to stay with her an hour—I want you."

She paid no attention to his last remark. "Ah, I fear her beyond anything." Her hands lifted in a gesture of abhorrence. "I have always despised her. She is big and strong and cruel, and always she has hated me, but pretended differently to Mr. Rieloff because he loved me so much. She would shut the door against me without a look—when my father goes I have no home—I will be as I was when I began, a thing that belongs to nobody, came from nowhere. Even you have treated me without respect and—and hurt me so I cannot bear it. I do not want ever to see you again——" Her voice was lost, and she turned her face away from him.

She was still as unforgiving then as she had been when she fled from him a few days before; he had hurt her too deeply to admit of persuasion or caresses. He had hoped for a moment that in her trouble and necessity she might cling to him, but her expression of reproach was too sincere to be doubted. If he were only certain that she loved him, he would have a foundation upon which to base persuasion, but he was not certain, and he had come determined to win at whatever cost; a repetition of the last days of thwarted will and unsatisfied passion was a thing he could not contemplate. Even if he sold his birthright, he must have his mess of pottage. He would promise marriage, anything, yes, and hold to it if she demanded. "Esther?"

She put him aside with a gesture. "You wish to plead with me—as in your letters—and I do not wish to listen."

"Esther, forgive me—and listen to me——" he begged.

"You made me come here—you took advantage," she said, her distress lost in anger. "No, I will not listen, however much you speak—I would not behave so to one I loved."

He flushed under her condemnation. "I had to see you—what else could I do? I tell you, Esther, I have just been wild these few days—and it was you that made me so. If you didn't want me to love you, why did you ever let me come near you?"

She was silent.

"Why did you?" he persisted.

"There was no one who loved me," she said, very low, "not even Mr. Rieloff now he is ill—but nothing you have said makes me sure you really love me. . . . And even if you did, it would be foolish for me to listen."

His flushed face paled a little. He put his hand on her arm, turning her toward him. "What did I ask you in my last letter?" he demanded.

She would not answer.

"I asked you to marry me—do you think I would have asked that if I didn't really love you?"

"I do not know—I am not certain."

"I came to ask you again this morning," he said, more quietly, "and you will say 'yes' to me before I let you go."

"But I cannot do it." Her eyes had dropped from his.

"Why not, Esther?" His arm was about her now, his lips almost on her cheek.

"I have thought a long time—I held your letter in my hand all night—but I cannot do it."

He kissed her softly. "If you thought about it all night you love me a little——" She had raised her hand to ward off his caress but he put it aside. "Say you love me, my little Lady."

"No," she said. "There has been just foolishness in my mind. You have much money, and a proud family, and I—I do not know at all who I am—Mr. Rieloff even does not know. I remember streets, many dirty children, and much talk, Russian, Yiddish, Italian. Mr. Rieloff took me from

people who did not know who I was. A girl in their tenement died and I was her baby. They spoke only Yiddish, and the girl did not speak their language—that was all they knew. I know one old Russian woman in New York; I have seen her again last year when I went with Mr. Rieloff, and she knows the same of me, but that is all. You are rich and I have nothing but a little money Mr. Rieloff gave me before he was so ill. I think he feared that Mrs. Rieloff might not be kind to me, and he wished to give me something before he was helpless. That little money is all I have in the world. . . . You see then what I am—I came out of the street—a stray dog, a bit of dirt, belonging to nobody—just only a waif.” She raised her hands, bringing them down again in a hopeless gesture, expressive of absolute nothingness.

“I don’t care an iota—what difference——”

She interrupted him with new earnestness. “But others will care. Your mother. . . . No, I have thought and made up my mind. It would be——”

“I tell you, Esther,” he broke in, violently, “I don’t care a damn what anybody thinks, or who you are—my own father began with nothing. When he died he was worth a few millions but that didn’t make him anything else but Bland Ericson. And my mother,”—his look hardened,—“she is clever, but I am my own master, and master of my money, and I shall marry whom I please. I want you, and I will have you. . . . Esther, you’ll say ‘yes’ to me?”

“No, I cannot—I do not know if you love me.”

“I *do* love you!” he exclaimed, passionately. “How many times must I tell you so! You say ‘I cannot,’ and you don’t mean it for one minute—you don’t look at me when you say it.” He turned and caught her by the shoulders. “Look at me, Esther!” he commanded. “Into my eyes—so. . . . Now say it to me—‘Rutledge, I don’t love you.’ . . . *Say it!*”

She looked at him silently, endeavoring to keep her gaze steady, but her lips began to quiver, and then the hot blood crept into her face, blinding her, flooding her with crimson. Her lips parted, her eyes wavered, and sank in helpless confusion, and he caught her to him with a cry. "I knew it!" he said, exultantly. "I knew it! Why have you tried to make me believe you didn't? Esther, you'll not get away now. . . . Kiss me then—no, I'll not let you move till you do——"

"You will let me go then?" The whisper came from against his breast.

"Yes."

"And if I come to you you will be good to me—always? I have nobody else in all the world to love me. . . . I know so little, and you are wise. You will tell me always how to do right?"

"Yes——" he said, hesitating over the word, grown suddenly breathless, then more clearly, "*Yes.*"

She turned her lips up to him then, timidly, still doubtful and uncertain, but as the tide of love rose in her, drowning her, her arms lifted and clung about his neck, holding him close, and the past, the present, the future, uncertainty, doubt and distress, faded away in the murmur of the river.

Her arms dropped at last, and she turned her face to his breast, but she did not move. He sat quite still also, breathing heavily, staring down at her tumbled hair. In all his reckless, impetuous life there had never been a moment like this, an endless delight that was his to hold, to keep, to repeat—a thing all his own, a thing given him because of her perfect faith in him.

"You're coming to me soon, Esther," he said, bent to her ear, and she whispered, "I cannot tell."

"But you've got to—I won't wait."

"When they take my father away, I will come—I will not leave him."

"I won't wait more than a day or two," he repeated, and she said nothing. He took her silence as consent.

"My little Lady? . . . Tell me something?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever loved anyone but me?"

"No."

"Has no one ever held you like this—and kissed you?"

She lifted shining eyes to his. "You know there has not."

"Yes, I do know it," he said, with a touch of awe that lowered his voice. "Why, Esther, you are sweet and good—and you're all mine to keep to myself—no one else can touch you." He sat and pondered as if stirred by unaccustomed thoughts, impressed by unfamiliar visions. He looked down at her gravely then, as if seeing her in some new light. "And I'll have you always too," he said.

But an echo of the old distress had returned to her. "You call me always your little Lady," she questioned, wistfully, "and I think maybe, quite certainly in my heart I am one, but you are *sure* you are not troubled that I am just only a waif-lady, a lady from nowhere?"

"Of course I don't care," he answered, a little absently. He was pondering other things.

Presently he asked, "Esther, you know that piece of mountain we can see from the big rock?"

"Yes, I was looking at it when the little stone dropped on my foot—I turned around then and saw you."

"I have a bungalow there. It was my father's and he used to go there for a week at a time, for he had coal mines at the foot of the mountain. There's a village at the mine, a few houses and a church for the miners, and a minister—we'll go up there to be married. It's a climb up the mountain to the house, but we'll go there afterwards and be happy

for months if we want to—not a living soul but ourselves. Nobody'll know a thing. I've dreamt of it for a week—that place with just you and me alone. I tell you, Esther, I'll wait a day—or two—if you make me, but——” He was all afire with eagerness again.

“I must think,” Esther said. “How can I think now—when you kiss me so?” She drew away from him, and he tried hard to keep her, but she would be free.

“Never mind,” he said, more quietly. “I'll have my way. You love me now, my little Lady, so you will listen to me.”

CHAPTER V

THE revolving doors at the entrance of the Fullerton Building kept up a ceaseless turn and swish, impelled by the stream of figures that detached themselves from the throng on Wall Street, hurried up the marble steps, and thrust themselves into their winged arms. A girl who had come more slowly up the steps paused a moment before yielding herself to the whirling embrace, a hesitation that expressed inexperience in this method of entrance. The man in gray who had run lightly up the steps behind her, waited for an impatient moment until she consigned herself to the revolving arms, then followed her example. He hastened past her to the line of elevators, stopping at the door marked "Express, Twenty-five." The girl came on slowly, glanced at the sign above the door, and stood waiting at his side.

It was a little after nine in the morning, and the elevators were ascending and descending in quick succession, the signal-lights changing their colors constantly. By its signal the Express was going up, and the man pulled out his watch for a hasty glance, the slight fold between the eyes that his pince-nez exaggerated, deepening as he looked up at the light.

The elevator descended with a noiseless swoop, and the girl, together with the group of men who had collected behind her, hastened to enter. She stood in the corner near the man in gray, pushed so close by those in front of her that her shoulder touched his arm. As the elevator leapt upward with the heart-stopping action most trying to the inexperienced, she gasped, and for a moment her hand lifted to his arm for support. At her touch he glanced down, his expression one of surprise not untinged with amusement which changed immediately to one of interest, and as they rushed dizzily

past the next twenty-three stories he continued to look at her. She had been veiled hitherto, an unnoticeable figure in a cheap suit, cut after the fashion of the year before, but now she had caught up her veil as if for breath, and her face was arresting; her brows, and the hair that grew low on her forehead, were so black, her skin so white, and her mouth so vivid. He could not see her eyes for they were lowered, but the wide lids were white like her cheeks, and dark fringed.

The elevator emptied its freight on the twenty-fifth floor, where they scattered to their various offices, their footsteps sounding clearly on the tiles of the corridor. The man had forgotten his haste, and walked more slowly, glancing behind him as he went. The girl had stopped at one of the windows, her hand against its jamb, her eyes out-looking, but there was something in her attitude that suggested an unconsciousness of the view beneath her. The building overtopped its neighbors, so that the New York as well as the Brooklyn side of East River could be seen. Just below were the Wall Street and Fulton Ferries, to the right a glimpse of Governor's Island, and to the left the span of Brooklyn Bridge, and still farther on, Manhattan Bridge.

The girl dropped her head for a moment against her arm, and the man, who had now reached his office door, stopped and looked back at her. He had an impression that she was either ill or suffering, and he hesitated whether or not to go to her, but thinking better of his impulse he shrugged slightly and entered the office. The door bore the sign:

WILLIAM BURNHAM
ROBERT KYLE
Attorneys-at-Law

It was the outer office he entered, and the girl at the typewriter looked up with a smile for him, as did the boy at the desk.

"Mr. Burnham is not here, of course?" he asked.

"Yes, he is, Mr. Kyle," the girl replied, "but he looks dreadfully."

"What a pity!" Robert Kyle exclaimed. "I hoped he wouldn't try to come down to-day! Is he alone?"

"Mr. Floyd-Kaufman's there," said the boy.

"Floyd-Kaufman! That means he will go to Chicago after all!" and with a muttered exclamation he went on into his private office. His desk faced the door into the outer room, and he had just seated himself when the door into the corridor opened, and the girl he had seen a few moments before entered. He could see her face very well now, for she was turned in his direction.

"Mr. Burnham—he is in?" The softly spoken words, freighted with their touch of accent, came distinctly to Robert Kyle's ear.

The boy's answer was sharp in contrast. "He's engaged now, but I'll give him your name as soon as he's at liberty—just sit down." She took a chair that stood beside her, and the boy asked, "What name shall I give him?"

"Esther Rieloff. He will know—I have been before."

Kyle studied her thoughtfully; he wondered what errand could have brought her to his senior partner. He was not interrupted in his observation, for she sat with her eyes on the floor, apparently oblivious to her surroundings. It struck him that he had seldom seen so wan a look on so young a face. The shadows beneath her eyes were marked; she looked ill. She was dressed like a country girl, but Kyle had observed that her manner of speech and her face showed refinement.

When the door into Mr. Burnham's room opened, she turned about expectantly, but the stout, heavy-faced man who emerged closed it decidedly behind him, and clapping his hat on his head went quickly out into the corridor. The

girl looked anxiously then at the office boy who rose and went into Mr. Burnham's room. Kyle expected him to return with a refusal, but instead he promptly ushered her into Mr. Burnham's private office. Kyle was surprised for he knew that Mr. Burnham was too ill to give attention to matters that were not important, and he wondered again what could have gained the girl an audience with his harassed and overburdened partner. Mr. Burnham's failing health had become a constant anxiety to Kyle, an anxiety prompted by affection and not self-interest, for the two men were close friends as well as partners. Kyle owed much to the kindness and affectionate regard of the elder man, a debt of gratitude that had never been irksome, because of the perfect understanding that existed between them.

Robert Kyle had come to New York six years before, a young law graduate from a western school, and had been fortunate enough to enter in a minor capacity the firm of Burnham and Holbrook. It was Mr. Burnham's predisposition at that time that had given him the opportunity. The elder man's liking had in time deepened into a warm attachment that led him to push Kyle's interests much as he would have done had the younger man been his son. Mr. Burnham and Mr. Holbrook were both elderly men, and the firm one of the oldest and most important in the city. The younger man's definiteness of purpose and unusual ability as well as his likable qualities had so won the confidence of both, that even before Mr. Holbrook's retirement from the firm, Kyle had been admitted to a partial partnership. After Mr. Holbrook's final withdrawal, Mr. Burnham had offered Kyle an independent partnership, an unusual opportunity for so young a man, but Mr. Burnham was a shrewd judge of ability. William Burnham had a genius for technicalities, but when absorbed in their intricacies he sometimes lost his grasp on the subject as a whole, and Kyle's faculty for

reaching the heart of a case, his comprehensive judgment when it was reached, and his dogged pertinacity when he had come to a decision, were sources of delight to the elder man.

"Got your teeth in it, have you, Kyle?" was a favorite remark of his, a friendly thrust at his partner's bulldog-like formation of jaw as well as his tenacity of purpose, and he would add, "Which is it now, your Scotch or your Irish?" And Robert Kyle might answer, "It's the Trusco Terminal vs. the Pennsylvania," and Mr. Burnham would exclaim, "Oh, your Scotch!"

Then again Kyle might reply, "It's Mrs. Klavinsky's suit against the Elevated; the woman's entirely destitute and crippled, and she deserves the few hundred I mean to get for her." Then his partner would laugh, "Oh, the Irish, it is. There's a Don Quixote streak in you that's not compatible with the practice of law and the enlargement of your pocketbook. It's queer the things you take hold of sometimes, Kyle."

"I don't go a-tilting for them, sir," Kyle would say, "but when they come my way I'll not turn them down—not if it's a clear case of injustice."

Kyle had called the elder man "sir" in the days when he did the drudgery of the firm, and he had never altered in his form of address. Robert Kyle was plain and forcible in his speech as he was in his whole personality, and one would certainly not describe him as a "polite man" in the sense of "finished," but kindly and courteous he was instinctively, and also disconcertingly regardless of merely social distinctions. He would lift his hat with equal sincerity to the office scrub-woman or the most ultra fashionable matron of his acquaintance. In his estimation gray hairs merited a token of respect entirely aside from what happened to be his opinion of the individual; a woman was entitled to consideration whatever his private judgment of her character;

a child in the nature of things called for protection, and a dog for kind treatment. In the business world he looked men fairly in the eye, and was a match for any one of them in mental agility. He avoided speculation, and kept his hand out of politics.

Just what was his more personal attitude to women few could determine. He had been at various times the subject both of interest and conjecture, but at thirty-one he remained unmarried and apparently unattached. He lived the usual life of a bachelor who avoids rather than seeks society, spends much of his time at his clubs and with men, and appears to care little for women's society. There was but one woman of Kyle's social acquaintance who could boast of an attachment on his part, and she had found him far from satisfactory, for he was a man who in general spoke his mind clearly, but on purely personal matters kept his own counsel with perfect success.

In appearance he was not even good looking, unless a certain strength in build and features may come under the head of good looks. He was indeterminate in coloring, dark-skinned and brown-haired, with strongly marked brows, and an ugly jaw. His slight frown and big mouth with its upward curve of lower lip were aggressive, but when he smiled his face became attractive. His eyes behind the never failing pince-nez were his best feature, a gray-blue, clear and steady in their glance, cold enough in anger, but in general expressive both of tolerance and a somewhat humorous appreciation of life.

Twenty minutes passed during which Kyle examined his mail and answered several telephone calls; then collecting some papers for the stenographer he went into the other room. He was just opposite Mr. Burnham's door when it opened suddenly, and the girl who had been closeted with his senior partner came out, running against him on her way to

the outer door. She was halted perforce, and for a moment he looked directly into her eyes. She had been pale before, now she was ghastly, the blood gone even from her parted lips. She wore a stricken look, and though her eyes were widely open they did not give the impression of seeing.

Kyle stood so close that he noticed how green they were; he could even see the flecks of red about the contracted pupils. The next moment she had jerked at the door, opened it, and slammed it behind her. The girl at the typewriter and the office boy stared after her in amazement, but under Kyle's stern look they kept silence. He gave his instructions to the girl as usual, but she noticed that he spoke curtly, his look more than usually grim. Then he went back into his own room, and in a moment the boy came to him.

"Mr. Burnham would like to see you, sir," he announced.

"Very well," Kyle replied.

He found Mr. Burnham sunk in his office chair, looking paler and thinner than was his wont. He was a small, spare man, with a shock of light hair grown gray, and a pair of extraordinarily bright dark eyes. His frame was slight, and his features unimportant, but the eyes saved his face from insignificance. They were humorous, irritable, shrewd, and at times kindly; the indomitable will of the man that persisted in triumphing over chronic ill health and the difficulties and demands of a large practice showed in that one brilliant feature.

He looked up at Kyle with a twist of the lips that might have been meant for a smile. "Sorry to bother you in the middle of the morning, Kyle, but I'm going home as soon as I can, and I wanted to see you."

"You shouldn't have come down at all, sir!" Kyle said. "Will you never learn to take care of yourself! The thing I'm glad of is that you are not going to Chicago to wear yourself out altogether."

He passed behind Mr. Burnham as he spoke, laying his firm hand for a moment on the little man's thin shoulder, then drew up a chair and sat down. The elder man glanced almost angrily at him, a flash of envy that cut across his anxious preoccupation, for the touch of Kyle's hand on his shoulder, the very manner in which he struck a match and lighted his cigar, then bent to lift from the floor and replace on the desk a paper that had fallen, was expressive of latent strength. As he stooped for the paper Mr. Burnham marked the breadth and muscular development at the back of his neck that bespoke strong animal vitality, and he sighed with the discomfort of a sick man who looks upon perfect health. It gave sharpness to his answer.

"But I *am* going to Chicago—never had any other intention."

Kyle knew that note in the elder man's voice, and had an accurate guess as to its cause, so he only remarked, "Well, let me look after everything I can for you. If you do go you don't want to be worrying about things here."

Mr. Burnham's frown lifted somewhat. "That's just what I want to talk about. Floyd-Kaufman was here and we are going to start for Chicago this evening. He wants me there, and he's coming to see you this afternoon about looking after his case at this end. He will have to do his own explaining—that wasn't what I wanted to see you about—I told you yesterday of the things I was going to burden you with while I'm away. If I had a little more of my usual strength, if I was more myself, I wouldn't be worrying you with my cases, and least of all with a thing like this." His brow was puckered again, and he pulled himself up in his chair, his thin fingers gripping the edge of the desk as he turned to Kyle. "Did you happen to see a girl go out of the office a little while ago?"

"Yes," Kyle said, but he made no comment.

"Well, she's just given me a bad half hour, and I'll have to ask your help in the mess. . . . Kyle, do you know the Ericsons at all? Mrs. Bland Ericson, or the son?"

There was a pause before Kyle replied, "Yes, I know them."

Mr. Burnham looked surprised. "I had no idea you did! Know them well, Kyle?"

"Fairly." The answer was noncommittal, and Mr. Burnham did not press the subject.

"If you know them, you know that the boy is a wild lot," he continued, "and you must know of the accident he had last spring—it was about the last of May, up in the Cumberland Mountains—he was coming down the mountain, just a rough mountain road, in some sort of an automobile, and the thing went wrong, the steering gear, or something, and he very nearly killed himself and the girl who was with him?"

Kyle nodded, "I know."

"Well, there's a queer sort of mixup now, and I've been brought into it simply because I looked after Bland Ericson's legal interests for years, and was supposed to look after his wife's affairs after his death. I've been called upon to give advice once or twice to the young man as well,"—Mr. Burnham shrugged impatiently,—"so I know something of his escapades. . . . Now there's nothing may come of this last development, and then again something may, and some one may be needed to act promptly. You'll be on the ground and I will not. I wouldn't take your time to talk about it, but I confess I'm bothered, for I've looked after the Ericson family affairs so long that in a way I feel bound to be interested. If there is any reason why you would rather not have anything to do with it, just say so, and I won't go on."

Kyle had taken his cigar from his lips, his steady eyes on the elder man's face. "Certainly not," he replied.

“Well, then, I’ll go back to my first knowledge of the trouble: About the first of last July a woman came in here to see me, and gave her name as Mrs. Gustav Rieloff. She was a big woman, and I should say she is about forty. She must have been a good looker when she was younger, and carries herself with perfect assurance, though evidently no lady—I mean in the way of breeding. She told me she lived near Staunton Hill, a country place in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains. She said she came to see me because she knew I was the Ericsons’ lawyer, and she wished to get into communication with Mrs. Ericson as directly as possible, and this was her tale so far as she gave it to me. She said that for some time young Ericson had been secretly paying attentions to her daughter, and had finally persuaded the girl to elope with him. That he procured a license, engaged the offices of a minister somewhere up in the mountains where the Ericsons have a coal mine, and that he took the girl up there with him. She said that she herself was away at the time, gone to the State Asylum with her husband who was to be incarcerated there, and returned to find her daughter gone. It seems that it was this girl who was with Rutledge when that smash-up occurred last spring; you remember the report in the papers was that she was killed and Ericson severely injured. Her name never got out, nor the story of the intended marriage. Certainly Mrs. Ericson or some one else took pains to quiet the thing, for the papers promptly quit after the first notice or two.

“Now this woman said that the girl was very badly hurt, her ankle broken, and that she lay insensible for some time; that even after she was sent home she seemed too shocked and dazed to realize what had happened. She laid some stress on the fact that the girl was, even in her seriously injured condition, sent at once back to her home, and young Ericson as promptly removed to New York. The marriage, of course,

had never taken place owing to the accident. Mrs. Rieloff said that from that day to the time of her coming to me there had not been one word from either Mrs. Ericson or her son. Now I know, as probably you do, that Rutledge Ericson was desperately ill for weeks as a result of being thrown on his head—it was a miracle his back wasn't broken—and as soon as he was able to be about he took himself off to Europe.

“The woman told me the whole story in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, and I, of course, asked her why she had not gone directly to Rutledge or his mother; that it was not a matter that concerned me, and I wanted nothing to do with it. She answered very coolly that she had her own reasons for coming to me first, and that if I had the Ericsons' interests at heart I would kindly notify Mrs. Ericson that she had called upon me and left her address, and that it would be 'wise' for Mrs. Ericson to communicate with her 'at once.' 'Just say for me also,' she continued, '*that Gustav Rieloff may be muzzled, but his wife is not,*' and I never looked into a meaner eye than hers, or one that expressed a more determined threat. I suppose I appeared a trifle startled, for she laughed. 'She'll understand what I mean better than you,' she said.

“I had let her tell her story and give her address without interruption, for I wanted all the spontaneous information possible, but when she stopped I started to ask a question, and to my surprise she rose at once to go.

“‘I have said what I have to say—you just deliver my message; that's all I want of *you!*’ she remarked. Her tone and manner were offensive enough to make a tadpole hot around the collar.

“‘I shall take pains to verify your story,’ I replied, ‘but let me tell you, Madame, that threats and insolence are not the most lucrative of commodities.’ She only laughed and went out without a word.

"I was angry and puzzled both. Of course, judging from the type of woman, I concluded that she meant to hold Mrs. Ericson and Rutledge up for all she could get out of them. I could understand very well, knowing Rutledge as I do, that he had really promised to marry her daughter, and most likely intended to do so, for he is reckless enough to do anything when he takes the bit in his teeth. I could also imagine that when he had had some of the folly knocked out of him by his accident, and had Mrs. Ericson at his elbow, he had undergone a change of heart. I could see how things stood with them, but I didn't understand the Rieloff woman. She had not intimated by a word that her daughter had any complaint to make except that she had had a promise of marriage made to her that had not been fulfilled, and that she had sustained a broken ankle, most probably as a result of young Ericson's recklessness. If he had done the girl any other harm there was nothing in the woman's story to show it. But with only that much to go on I knew she could make the Ericsons trouble, and that there would be plenty of lawyers who would help her do it, but I couldn't get rid of the impression that she had something else in mind than just her daughter's affair, and that she meant to handle the matter herself. There was something so casual in the way she had told her story in the first place, and such a determined emphasis in her last remarks, I wondered if the daughter's complaint was just a peg on which to hang the mother's coat. I don't know how I got the idea, but you know how they will come to you—more from a look than anything else. . . . Well, I thought over it a little, and then wrote to Mrs. Ericson, outlining what Mrs. Rieloff had said, and gave her the woman's address. I told her if she thought best to see me, I would go into the matter more fully with her. She appeared promptly the next afternoon.

"I used to pity Mrs. Ericson, for any woman who had

Bland Ericson for a husband deserved pity. He was one of the best business men I've ever known, but he was a hard drinker, and for years openly neglected his wife. He was something of a beast when women were concerned. I didn't pity her so much after I knew her better, for I discovered that she was very capable of looking out for herself, as sharp as steel in spite of her childish voice and round eyes, as clever a woman as I've happened to come in contact with. She came in here that afternoon looking as bright and taking as usual; she looks thirty, and I happen to know that she is forty-four. She wanted to know every particular of Mrs. Rieloff's interview with me, and I gave them to her. She listened thoughtfully, but not as if particularly impressed, and then she sighed.

"'Poor Rutledge!' she said. 'He does seem to have the faculty of getting into messes.' I agreed with her that he did. She thought a little longer, and then she said, 'I don't see any reason for my seeing this woman or your troubling about the thing. Rutledge is going to Europe in a day or two, and she will find it a little difficult to reach him; if she really means trouble she will let you know, of course.'

"'She struck me as being in an ugly mood,' I said, 'still it may have been bluff and I not clever enough to detect it.' Mrs. Ericson's equable manner irritated me, I don't know why; there's something terribly calm about people who have a few millions, even when they are discussing the dishonorable conduct of an only son.

"'She became a little more animated. 'Of course she is angry,' she went on to say, 'and it is unpardonable in Rutledge, but he can't marry that girl, and why should he? You have seen what the mother is—fancy marrying her daughter. The only thing she can do is to sue for breach of promise, and I don't think she'll do that. Of course I leave everything in your hands, and Rutledge is writing you the same

thing, so you can feel free to use your own judgment in case anything should come up, but if Mrs. Rieloff doesn't appear again, please don't give a thought to the matter—I shall not,' she assured me in her baby voice—it has a sort of lisp in it, hasn't it, Kyle? Well, she went off with a smile for me, but she looked quite as cool and undisturbed as Mrs. Rieloff herself. It struck me that they would make two pretty good antagonists." The little man had lifted himself in his chair somewhat, and sat tipped back, his hands clasped behind his head, his brilliant eyes narrowed slightly. He seemed to have forgotten his illness, and the expenditure of precious time, apparently deeply interested in his own narrative.

Robert Kyle smoked on in silence.

"Rutledge Ericson's letter came in good time and was a study in brevity," Mr. Burnham continued. "It reads like this: 'Dear Mr. Burnham, It's too bad you have to be bothered with my affairs. Please settle the Rieloff business as you and my mother think best. I'm sorry enough that I ever knew any one by that name.' Succinct that, isn't it? . . . I didn't think it of the boy. Well, I fully expected to hear something from Mrs. Rieloff, but I didn't; the summer went by and I forgot about the matter. It was just three weeks ago that I was given a reminder. I won't say how I discovered it—it isn't worth while—but I found out that on the very morning of the day Mrs. Ericson had her talk with me—I told you she was here in the afternoon—she had transferred to Mrs. Rieloff property valued at fully ten thousand dollars. My discovery was purely accidental; if I had not known so very well just what property Bland Ericson had died possessed of I should never have known it at all." Mr. Burnham brought his chair back to an upright position with a jerk, a tinge of color showing in his pale cheeks. "I don't know why the thing made me so angry, but it did. I was mad all through. I think possibly it was

because I am used to having the confidence of my clients, and it was such a silly piece of duplicity on Mrs. Ericson's part. Leaving everything in my hands, was she! I was more than ever certain, too, that the peg I spoke of had had to support a pretty heavy coat. . . . Now Kyle, the accident in the mountains occurred about the first of June; Mrs. Rieloff came to see me in July, and now it's the last week in October. It was about the first of October that I made my discovery of the property transfer, and for three weeks my anger simmered. Two days ago a girl came up here asking to see me. The name she sent up was Esther Rieloff, and I ordered the boy to tell her I was too busy to see her—I was in no mood to touch that matter again. Then she sent in a note: 'Could I give her Mr. Rutledge Ericson's address, or tell her how to find him—she wanted very much to see him?'

"Now, I'll have to confess," Mr. Burnham said, "that I have been curious as well as angry, and it entered my head that I might teach Mrs. Ericson a lesson. I had really told the truth when I said I was too busy to see the girl, but I sent back word that I would see her this morning. I took some pleasure in writing to Mrs. Ericson that day, that Miss Rieloff had appeared, and that I would refer her to Mrs. Ericson herself, as she had understood so well how to arrange matters with the mother. It was a mean little thing to do, but I do do those things occasionally as you know very well.

"I received no word from Mrs. Ericson until this morning. When I came in Floyd-Kaufman was waiting for me, and I had no time to look at my mail, but I noticed a fat envelope in Mrs. Ericson's writing. Floyd went, and Miss Rieloff was waiting, but I took time to open the letter and read what Mrs. Ericson had to say. She didn't say much: only that because of the enclosed letters, sent to her by Miss Rieloff, she had felt driven to make terms with Mrs. Rieloff, and afterwards had felt so ashamed at having been intimi-

dated by the woman and her daughter, that she had hated to tell me anything about it. She explained that Rutledge had been so dangerously ill at the time she had not dared to question him. Had she been able to consult with him, she would have acted very differently. She had been taken in by the girl's story and terrified by Mrs. Rieloff's threats. When she was able to talk with Rutledge she had learned that the girl's story was a fabrication. Rutledge had been foolish enough to ask Esther Rieloff to marry him, and to a certain extent he was responsible for the automobile accident, but aside from that she had no ground for complaint. Certainly Mrs. Rieloff and her daughter had been well paid for a broken ankle, and might as well cease their endeavors to extort more money either from Rutledge or herself. She thought them two bad women, and when I read the girl's letters I would understand why she had been so easily duped. They were in her estimation a very clever bit of writing. She ended by apologizing humbly for having appeared to act insincerely, and thanked me warmly for what she called my many kindnesses to Rutledge and herself—a neat little letter, but I was neither pacified nor impressed. I meant to have a plain word or two with Miss Rieloff, and then send Mrs. Ericson's packet of letters back to her, and have done with the whole affair.

“Then Miss Rieloff was brought in, and I give you my word I had a shock. I had expected to see a duplicate of Mrs. Rieloff. I'm not quick to get to my feet these days—it's too much of an effort—but I did so, and the girl came quietly up to the desk and held out her hand. She had never moved her big eyes from me from the moment she entered, and I shook hands with her, not knowing at the time that I was doing anything of the kind. . . . You saw her out there, Kyle?”

“Yes.”

"I don't need to describe her then. She's not the same blood as that Rieloff woman. 'I am so sorry that I must disturb you when you are very busy—I will take just only one minute,' she said. I'd like to give the interview as it occurred, Kyle. I have a very good verbal memory, and like to air it occasionally." Mr. Burnham smiled unmirthfully.

"Go on, sir," said Kyle.

"She has an odd way of putting her words that's taking," Mr. Burnham continued. "I asked her to sit down, but she declined. 'I only wish to ask for an address,' she explained. 'I wish to have Mr. Rutledge Ericson's address very much.'

"I'm not much good on my feet, so I sat down, and she remained standing. In those few minutes I had decided to speak plain truth to Miss Rieloff.

"'I do not know his address,' I said, 'but it would be possible, I think, for you to get it from his mother; she would have it.' Every bit of light went out of her face, and she stood without speaking.

"'Could you not get it for me?' she asked, much as a lost child who was too tired to cry any longer might ask for its mother.

"'Miss Rieloff,' I said, 'I want to make a little explanation to you. I have been for many years the Ericsons' lawyer, and am supposed to look after their affairs. As things stand between you and them I am not the person to whom you should come with that request. I would not feel free to give you Mr. Ericson's address, even if I had it.'

"She looked both puzzled and distressed. 'I am so very sorry,' she said, at last. 'I came only because Mr. Ericson spoke your name to me once, and said you were a friend of his family. I remembered it, and I knew not one other person in New York who knows him.'

"'Miss Rieloff,' I asked, 'are you the young lady who was

with Mr. Ericson when he was injured last spring?' Her eyes opened wide at me, then she turned scarlet, but she answered, 'Yes,' then added, 'I was engaged to be married to him—we were on our way to be married.'

"So your mother told me last summer,' I remarked. I had had my suspicions the moment I had looked into her face, and I meant to verify them.

"My mother! I have no mother,' she said. 'I am Mr. Rieloff's adopted daughter—I do not belong to her at all. . . . You mean that Mrs. Rieloff—she came here to see you?' Surprised and troubled as she looked, her expression was contemptuous.

"Yes, Mrs. Rieloff came to me about the first of last July,' I replied, 'and gave me the history of the accident, and from her manner I gathered that she thought both you and herself greatly injured by the conduct of the Ericsons. She demanded to see Mrs. Ericson, and Mrs. Ericson has since told me that she did see Mrs. Rieloff and paid her a sum of money for dropping the matter entirely.'

"She looked at me with so horrified an expression that I stopped. 'You mean Mrs. Rieloff asked for money as if it were for me, and Mrs. Ericson paid it!' she said, aghast; then her voice rose a little: 'You mean Mr. Ericson, he knew it too?'

"I am not certain that he knew what his mother had done,' I replied.

"Oh, no,' she said, 'not that! He *could not* have known.' She had grown so white I thought she would fall, and I begged her to be seated, but she thrust the suggestion aside with a gesture. I tell you, Kyle, I felt wretched. I knew well enough what her need was. That contemptible boy—to bring her to that pass and then turn his back on her, and his mother to assist him in doing it!

"My child,' I said, 'I have hurt you, and I am very

sorry. I am afraid I can do little but hurt you. Mrs. Ericson writes that it was because of the letters you wrote to herself and her son that she made what terms she could with Mrs. Rieloff.'

"She looked at me, startled at first, and then with knit brows, and I received the impression that in spite of her simplicity of manner, there was a good brain behind that remarkable face of hers. 'But—but,' she said, 'Mrs. Ericson saw Mrs. Rieloff before I wrote any letter—I did not write till after July——' Her eyes began to flame. 'That is not the truth—what good is it for her to lie like that?'—and I was asking myself the same question, Kyle. 'Mrs. Rieloff hates me, and she used my name to help her to get money. Mrs. Ericson feared her and paid her. Mrs. Ericson fears me—I believe it now. She would rather have me die than see her son—she would have those who are innocent suffer all a life long! I waited and waited for one word from him. I only knew that he lived because of what the people said on Staunton Hill, and then I wrote a little letter to her, just only asking if he would get quite well and telling her how I longed for a word from him. She answered me nothing. I waited and I wrote to him, and not one word came. I do not think he was ever given my letter—he must have answered something—one word—if he had read it. Then I wrote to her what was my very heart—if I were dying I should speak as I did to her—and I had only silence. I came here then—I must come even though I did not know a place to go and had not one friend in all this city. I knew that she had sent him to Europe that I might not come near him, but I hoped you might tell me how I could write to him. I will not believe of him that he would do as she has done; there is some other reason for that!' She came around the desk and stood over me. 'You speak of my letters. Has she sent them to you?' she demanded.

“‘Yes,’ I began, ‘but——’

“‘And she would do *that!*’ she said, in a whisper. ‘Ah!’ she brought her clenched fists to her cheeks, like this, and looked at me over them. ‘And she has also written a few lies about them!’ She dropped her hands, brought them down, sharply, so. ‘And he, Rutledge, has he also written to you—of me? *No!*’

“I would have given something to have been able to look her in the eye, and tell a lie,” the little man said, his brows furrowed, “even to have been able to control my expression, but she understood.

“‘Show it to me!’ she said, and I thought she would shriek it next, ‘*Show it to me!*’

“I don’t know if I did right, but I took that damnable boy’s letter from the drawer and gave it to her. She must know the truth sooner or later. She read it through and held it. ‘I am sorry enough I ever knew any one by that name,’ she said, in the soft way she says her words, and repeated, ‘I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name,’ and then she was at the door and gone before I knew what she was about!” Mr. Burnham ran his hands through his shock of gray hair. “A miserable mess!” he said. “A wretched, miserable *mess* it is! . . . And I ought to have managed better. . . . She went off without a word of her whereabouts too—somebody’ll have to locate her——”

“What!” Kyle exclaimed, sharply. “You haven’t her address! She didn’t say she’d return—and no way of reaching her?”

“No, of course not,” Mr. Burnham returned, startled by his partner’s manner. “I’ve told you everything, and we’ll have to——”

“Wait a minute!” Kyle interrupted. He rose abruptly and went into the next room, and Mr. Burnham, who looked after him in surprise, heard him say something sharply to

the boy, then go on into his own office, where he remained for some time.

"What is it, Kyle?" he asked anxiously, when the other returned.

"I've done what I could on the spur of the moment," Kyle replied, his look thoughtful. "She couldn't have gotten far away from Wall Street in this short time."

"You mean you've sent after her!" Mr. Burnham exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, in several different directions, and I've taken other steps as well on the chance they miss her—I can't think of anything else just now." He stood at the desk, his manner preoccupied. "I'll wait a little and see what turns up; she hasn't been gone much more than a half-hour yet, and if necessary I'll start out myself."

"Why she'll come back here, Kyle," Mr. Burnham urged. "What else is there for the poor girl to do? I wouldn't be so upset——"

"You see," Kyle continued, following out his own thoughts, "I saw her when she came out—came face to face with her—and since you've explained things to me—what must be her condition, and particularly about the way she took Ericson's letter—it occurred to me that she might not trouble either yourself or me, or any one again—there's a short way out of difficulties sometimes."

"You mean she'd do herself a harm?" Mr. Burnham exclaimed. "Nonsense!" But the little man grew gray.

"This city's a mighty cheerless place to be adrift in," Kyle returned, with a touch of bitterness. "We've neither of us tried it, but others have."

Mr. Burnham's thin hands shook as he took an envelope from his desk. "Kyle, here are those letters—perhaps they'd give us a clue—where to look for her I mean."

Kyle shook his head. "No, I have thought of that," he

said. "They were written from that place in the mountains, and she had not thought of coming here then. You remember she told you she had no idea where she would stay here, and that she hadn't a friend."

Mr. Burnham was silent.

"Besides,"—and Kyle's mouth set firmly,—“I am not going to read her letters unless I am driven to it. I'd thank even a lawyer for that amount of delicacy. If I can't locate her by night and have a talk with her, I shall have to read them and go to Mrs. Ericson—it's the next best thing to do.”

“She oughtn't to have sent them to me in the first place!” Mr. Burnham burst out. “I don't care what the girl's fault is, she's pure gold compared to those two. Mrs. Ericson ought to be grateful to the Providence that would give her son as good a wife as that—he'll go a good deal farther and fare worse! Their family history won't stand much airing! Mrs. Ericson criticising a child like that indeed! I know what she thinks. She is satisfied the girl is too helpless to give her trouble—she and Mrs. Rieloff have settled their little affair, whatever it is, and reached a satisfactory conclusion, and the girl may go on the street for anything either of them cares. What people!” His voice had risen high in anger, the querulous note of old age apparent in its accents. It was not the first time Kyle had noticed a drop into momentary childishness. “Who's going to fuss around in this mess, and do a good turn for that poor girl and at the same time keep the Ericson skeletons under lock and key—I'll bet there's more behind all this than either of us knows. I can't ask you to look after it, and certainly I can't. It bothers me!” He moved his gray head restlessly from side to side.

“I thought it was understood that I was to look after it,” Kyle said, soothingly. “We'll straighten it out in some way.” Then, conscious of his partner's spent look, he came round to his side and put his hand on his shoulder. “Come, sir,” he

said, "we won't talk any more. I suggest you call Mrs. Ericson up and ask her if she has any objection to my taking your place in this matter. She will answer, 'None whatever,' irrespective of what she is really thinking,"—Kyle's under lip lifted,—“and you, sir, can dismiss the subject from your mind.”

“And, Kyle, you'll surely find that child?”

“I shall try my best, sir. The street is no place for her,” Kyle answered.

CHAPTER VI

THE outer door had closed that evening on even the office boy when Robert Kyle began to clear his desk of its accumulated papers. It was a bit of daily house-cleaning he rarely neglected. No matter how rushed his day he found time for that. He frequently remained after office hours, sometimes to make preparation for the next day, occasionally to dispose of unfinished work, but more often to have half an hour, or an hour, of undisturbed meditation while the spell of the working day was still upon him. Tipped far back in his chair, he would sit sometimes for twenty minutes, immovable, a cigar between his teeth, his eyes on the spread of city beneath. It was a vast army of roofs he looked down upon, bristling with sky-scrapers, and atwinkle with many windows. The East Side lay before him, and far to the left the higher towers of upper Broadway were visible. In the summer he would watch the play of the disappearing sun on the clouds above him, or on the roofs and spires beneath, and in winter the oncoming of early twilight that gradually revealed the starlit sky above, and the magic leaping into life of the myriads of sparkling lights below.

"Mr. Kyle never stops working," the girl at the typewriter was in the habit of saying, but in that she was mistaken. His hour of meditation over, his back once turned upon his office door, and Kyle had effectually done with business; the next twelve hours were given to other interests.

After clearing his desk this evening he took from a drawer the bulky envelope that bore Mrs. Ericson's handwriting, and laid it before him. He had taken every means his ingenuity suggested to find some trace of Esther Rieloff, but

so far his efforts had been unsuccessful. He turned now to her letters for possible assistance. Kyle had trained himself to consider one thing at a time, to keep the details of each case carefully docketed in its right mental pigeon-hole, but Esther's face and Mr. Burnham's explanation had remained all day in the foreground of his consciousness; he had not looked upon it as a "case."

Kyle knew Mrs. Ericson's writing well. It was a petite hand, each small letter distinctly formed, and well rounded. To one who knew her it instantly called up a vision of herself. He read her note to Mr. Burnham first, and smiled slightly as he finished and laid it aside. The envelope contained three other enclosures, each folded separately, but without their original envelopes, and as he noted the circumstances he smiled again, his eye cold. The dates of the postmarks would scarcely have tallied with her statement to Mr. Burnham that it was Esther's letters that had driven her to make terms with Mrs. Rieloff. Possibly Esther had omitted to date her letters, and Kyle found that to be so. As Esther had said, there were only three letters, a short note to Mrs. Ericson, a somewhat longer one to Rutledge Ericson, and another letter that filled several sheets.

Kyle read the note to Mrs. Ericson first, and found that Esther had described it correctly. It was a plea to Mrs. Ericson to write her something of Rutledge's condition. Kyle took up her letter to Rutledge next, but laid it down again. He had a strong disinclination to read it, and determined not to do so unless it should be absolutely necessary. The longer letter bore only the day of the week, and was addressed to Mrs. Ericson. Esther's writing was minute and curiously irregular, the words at times almost illegible. She began abruptly, crudely, as one too tense with emotion to pause for choice of words:

"DEAR MRS. ERICSON:

"I have written to you, and in my trouble also to Rutledge, and have waited weeks with not one word. I have thought, I have suffered, I have put down pride, everything, of me myself there is nothing left, but because in this world there should be pity for the innocent, I come to you. You are a woman and you bore your son—have pity then, not upon me, for I must endure what comes to me as my due, but have pity and consideration for your son's child. I must tell you a little from the beginning, for Rutledge may not have told you all, and there is much that he even cannot know, and also I feel that it is you, not he, who wishes never again to see me.

"You know that I have no name of which I am certain, that I am only the adopted daughter of the kind man who took me and gave me a home. I think maybe I come from parents who did their child the same injury I have done mine—I do not know. I remember a little of the poverty in which I was born, that is all. My adopted father brought me here, and I have lived here since in this quiet country, with only Mr. Rieloff and my books, almost never anybody else, for we were poor. My father taught me much, but he gave me no religion. He himself believed in no such God as is usually taught to children, and he believed in no life after this. I think perhaps to take that out of a child's life is not best, but I do not judge him. He could not teach me what he himself did not believe. I know he is a good man who in his life has had great trouble, a trouble that has made him disbelieve in much.

"It was so I grew up. Mr. Rieloff was old and very sad, and when I wished to be really happy I had only my dreams to live with, for though I could see a little from the people on Staunton Hill how gayly some girls lived, I had none of that life myself. It was from books I learned most about people's lives, and of things that were evil and others that are good. I lived those people's lives over in myself, but always it seemed to me the greatest delight would be to have some one who was young and happy like myself to love me. I dreamed to myself how he would look, and what he would do. Sometimes when I thought I had the world all to myself, I would call to the hills opposite the words that I had found would make the longest echo, and then think how it would be if the lover I dreamed of should hear me and answer. I was a foolish girl longing for love.

"I met your son on the hillside one day, and we talked, and he

begged to see me again. We met often alone like that, and he always asked me to love him, if not at first in words, always by his looks. He made me afraid, but he made me happy as well. I held him a long way off, I would not even touch his hand, but when I was alone I would in my thoughts lay my cheek against it. One day he made me very angry and ashamed that I had come to meet him, and then I really began to think what it was I was doing. He was rich, and I poor. I had no name, and he belonged with people like himself. He would have a right to think lightly of me for meeting him secretly, even though he begged for it, and knew that it was because of my father's illness, and because of Mrs. Rieloff that I could not ask him to my house. It seemed to me I could not live and put the thought of him away, but I must.

"Then Rutledge wrote to me several times, and pleaded with me to see him. He told me again and again that he loved me, he asked forgiveness of me many times, and at last he asked me to marry him, for he could not live without me. I sent his letters back to him—it was the best answer I could give, for if I had written anything, no matter what, he would have known that I loved him, and then nothing would have stopped him. He came then to my house, and demanded that I see him. I tell the truth when I say that I did what I could to persuade him against thinking of me. He would care for nothing, listen to nothing—he wanted but the one thing, and that was to know if I loved him, and I could not hide it from him.

"I promised him then to marry him, and he did everything in the world to make me love and trust him, and I *must* believe that he loved me—how can I bear to live and not think so. I *will not* believe that he meant only to deceive me in order to do me harm.

"He wished me to go with him to the mountains and be married there, and it seemed better to me than to be married so near Staunton Hill, where many would talk. I was very anxious about you, but Rutledge told me many times that you would in the end be glad that he had married a good girl, though you might be angry at first. He said he had not always lived right, but that I would teach him to do better, and that you ought to be glad. I believed you loved your son so much that you would forgive me by and by, and then I would not care who knew of our marriage.

"I would not leave my father until they took him away to the asylum, and I made Rutledge wait, but we saw each other every day, and I was very happy. Mrs. Rieloff went with my father, and

we went to the mountains. We went in the afternoon. The coal train that took us up was very slow, so it was evening when we arrived, but Rutledge said he had arranged everything. He had the license for us to marry, and he had an automobile sent there for us. You know the village, for you were there when you came to get Rutledge after he was hurt. There are only the miners' huts and one house for the church, where also the minister lives. We went there, and one of the miners told us that the minister was not there because there had been an accident at another mine across the mountain, and he had been gone all day. That he would not be back until eight or nine that night. Rutledge was very angry, and grew quite white, but the man could say nothing except that the minister had said he would be back by nine o'clock, and to tell us so. He had said, 'the injured and suffering need me more than those who would marry.'

"Rutledge thought, and then he gave the man money and told him to get a horse and buggy, and as soon as the minister came to drive him up the mountain to where we would be at the house. He put me in the automobile and we rode all the way to the house. I had no idea it would be so far. The steep places in the road were horrible. It grew quite dark, for it was cloudy, and it began to rain a little, and the wind was cold. When Rutledge took me into the house and lighted a fire I was cold and shivering. He made me sit by the fire until I was warm again, and he called the house our home, and said he had never been so happy in his life before. It seemed a very beautiful home to me, with the firelight and the soft rugs, and red curtains. He showed me all the house, and we cooked supper together. It was just as I had imagined it would be in my own home with my husband beside me to love me. We took the things away and came to the fire and waited. It grew to after nine o'clock, then to ten, and the rain began to come down. It came in torrents, pouring on the roof until it and the wind shook the house. Rutledge had gone often to the window, but in the rain I knew that no one could climb up the mountain that night. I told Rutledge so, and he said, 'What does it matter whether he comes or not; if we love each other we belong to each other as much as if we were married by twenty ministers. Marriage is just only a convention, and we will have to conform to it, but the real marriage is our promise to each other. If we love each other enough for perfect trust it is all we need—what do a few hours matter? If we choose to be happy now it is our own affair—it concerns no

one else,' and he held me in his arms and called me his wife over and over, and because I loved him I wished to believe, and I listened to him. I gave myself to him, and in that act he became to me what I called him, my husband—it was his part to love and command, and mine to love and obey. I tell you all that was in my mind and heart.

"I could not bring myself to tell it, except that I am desperate at what I have done, not at what I have done to myself, though that is terrible, but at what I have brought upon one who will be helpless. I can tell it to you only because you are his mother, and I hope, I pray you will understand. If you are a very good woman you may only pity weakness, but if you have ever known what it was to love beyond your will, and think no evil, then you will really understand.

"You know what happened the next morning when we went down the mountain. We had chosen to make our own law, and consider no one but ourselves, and punishment did not wait long. I have lived through many weeks since I first knew the full meaning of the wrong we did. Rutledge's sin was as great as mine, but the half must belong to me, and I would not wish to shirk it. Perhaps when a man learns that he can persuade a woman to yield to him, she ceases to be desirable as his wife. If that is what Rutledge thinks, I will grant it. If you think me unfit after what I have told you, and I have told the truth exactly, I will grant that also, no matter what I myself think. I will do with myself whatever you, his mother, demand, if you will only give my child that is coming protection and the right to its name. It is of your own blood—how can you refuse it? I have no name, now less than ever, and I know what that may mean to a child. It would not be much for Rutledge to do—the law could free him afterwards—I have read that it could. He need never see me again if he did not wish, but we would then have done what we could to right one wrong. Sometimes I have thought if it would not be best to lose myself in the river—if I would be doing so great a harm to my child as I would by living. I have not thought wildly about it, I have considered it, but I cannot do it. What has been given to me I cannot destroy.

"For some reason I feel that it is to you I must appeal, so I have written to you from my heart, and no word that is not true. I beg you to hear me.

"ESTHER RIELOFF."

Kyle laid the last sheet on the desk and sat still for a time looking down at it, his lips, that were always so firmly closed, parting slightly in an effort to relieve the tightness in his throat. Mechanically he took his handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped the palms of his hands. Then he rose and went to the window for a moment but turned away again restlessly, walking the length of the office, back and forth. It was characteristic of him that he had not put the letter down with an oath, his anger springing to the relief of his pity. But it was his anger that sent him travelling up and down now.

“Damn him!” he said, between his teeth, and then in a deeper growl, “And *his mother* too! God, what’s the woman made of! The whole thing was more brutal than anything I ever thought he would do, but for *her*——” He turned abruptly to the window, and looked out over the city.

While he had been at his desk the twilight had grown so as to make reading difficult, and now the city had put on its spangled garment, like a painted woman decking herself for a revel. Where in the ghastly loneliness of the space spread out beneath him was the girl whose naked soul he had just had the temerity to look upon? Kyle knew better than most men the festering vice and horrors of a great city. He had always been wide awake to personal interest when it did not do violence to certain instincts that were strong in him; he had studied his city carefully from the standpoint of political possibility, and turned from it in disgust. It had led him, however, to look into much that men in general either determinedly ignore, or negatively foster. He knew the underworld of New York as one can who has interest enough to study it, combined with an intelligent understanding of the political mechanism that controls it. Its unspeakable vileness, its bestial cruelty and voracity, and its illimitable filth were an open book to him. Into what corner of wretch-

edness would the white-faced girl into whose blazing eyes he had looked that morning creep? Into which of the myriad pitfalls would she stumble and sink out of sight?

The absolute sincerity and the courage shown in Esther's appeal to Mrs. Ericson had struck deep in Kyle, enlisting a sympathy that was something more than pity for ignorance and helplessness. Esther's plea had not been for herself. He pondered determinedly every possible means of discovering her; the character that her letter to Mrs. Ericson revealed was of too fine a quality to be destroyed. Kyle's sympathy was augmented now by the element of respect that makes for personal interest. He intended that his search should be systematic and thorough, and he flushed still more hotly when he asked himself how Mrs. Ericson would regard his determination. As if in answer to his thoughts the telephone rang.

"Yes?" he said.

"Is that you, Robert?" Mrs. Ericson's voice asked. Kyle knew its lisp well.

"Yes, it is I." His answer was a trifle husky, for he had been surprised, and his anger was still burning.

"I knew your trick of staying late at the office, or I suppose I should never have found you," she said, her bright childish voice pleasant in its inflection. "I wonder if you couldn't come up this evening to see me? You know, of course, that Mr. Burnham telephoned me this morning, and I want to see you. I can't say what I want to over the telephone, and I know what to-morrow will be like at the office with Mr. Burnham gone—all the extra work it will mean to you."

Kyle had decided while she was speaking. "I have an engagement that will keep me until nine, but if you don't mind my being late I will come."

"Oh, I'm glad. And, Robert, will you bring those letters

with you when you come? It is they I want to talk to you about—that is—partly.”

His reply was given in a somewhat clearer tone. “If you know my tricks of the office, Maud, you know I never carry important papers about with me. It will have to be a visit to the office, I am afraid, if we are to go over the papers.”

There was a moment's pause—then, “Well, never mind about them—if you have read them. Have you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I'll expect you, good-by.” She had concluded somewhat abruptly.

Kyle hung up the receiver with an ejaculation of disgust. “If it was worth while I should wonder just what it is she wants.” He sat for a time frowning over his thoughts, then rose to leave. He locked his office door behind him, but he carried his thoughts with him to the subway.

Kyle's acquaintance with Mrs. Ericson dated back to his first year in New York. He was then twenty-four and she more than ten years his senior, though no older in appearance than he. From the beginning she had been attracted by him, and he had yielded quickly to her charm, lending himself willingly to the unaccustomed gayeties into which she drew him. Kyle was the son of gentlefolk, but he had grown up in a western town, knew little of society, and nothing at all of the class Mrs. Ericson collected about her. At first he had been attracted and somewhat dazzled by its apparent brilliancy, later he had been merely interested in observing the exotic types he met, for they resembled highly colored fungi too closely to greatly tempt his wholesome appetite.

Kyle's sturdy independence, coupled with unflinching courtesy, had made him noticeable in the circle to which Mrs. Ericson had introduced him, making him the object of much attention from the neurotic women who were Mrs. Ericson's familiars. Certainly he was plied with sufficient

opportunities for diversion of which he failed to avail himself. Probably his sincere attachment to Mrs. Ericson had saved him from other entanglements, for in their earlier acquaintance Kyle had given Mrs. Ericson a very young man's adoration, fascinated by her piquant charm and quick intellect more than by the undeniable physical attraction she had for most men. Certainly it was the quality of his affection for Mrs. Ericson that had saved him from conduct which in later years he would have bitterly regretted. There were several men who might have boasted had they chosen that they knew Maud Ericson very well, but Kyle was perhaps the only one who had escaped unscathed by an intimate knowledge of her. In his early days of respectful affection Kyle had hotly resented Bland Ericson's contemptuous neglect of his wife, and sympathized warmly with her. In his first year of devotion he would gladly have gone around the world on Mrs. Ericson's service, but even had his infatuation been of a lower order, and resistance more difficult, Kyle would have struggled against the temptation Mrs. Ericson offered. He was naturally a man of strong passions, but he was also largely master of his will, and he did not know until wider experience had enlightened him, how deliberate had been her effort to tempt him.

A character that is founded on insincerity will not endure lengthened inspection, even when that inspection is prejudiced by affection, and Kyle's disillusion was gradual but complete. He learned that the freedom Bland Ericson allowed his wife and her affluent circumstances were to her sufficient compensations for her husband's shortcomings; Bland Ericson had many faults, but niggardliness was not among them. He learned also by degrees that Mrs. Ericson's methods were unlovely, and that she was cautious and skilful in the management of her affairs both emotional and financial, but the traits in her that became clearest to him were her peculiar

capacity for falsehood, and her real genius for plausibility.

Kyle had seen little of Bland Ericson or Rutledge, so his gradual withdrawal had been simply a less frequent seeking of Mrs. Ericson's society. Her friends he had long since tired of, and avoided as much as possible. It was owing far more to Kyle's firmness and tact than to Mrs. Ericson's guard over her feelings that he was enabled to withdraw without an open breach. "Quarrel" was a word he had always endeavored to eliminate from his vocabulary, and Mrs. Ericson preferred finally to swallow her anger rather than lose even the semblance of Kyle's friendship.

After her husband's death Kyle still visited Mrs. Ericson occasionally, though he had ceased to have the slightest personal interest in her. She was far too clever to bore him, and at times he rather enjoyed watching her methods, and following her motives, and in merely her features, voice, and manner, he still found her attractive. It was after her husband's death that Mrs. Ericson made a determined effort to place their friendship—for so she still called it—on a different footing. She had been tactful in showing Kyle her love for him, and not unskilful in setting forth her income as an asset, but Kyle had become a good fencer, and was neither tempted nor impressed. He had absolutely no belief in Mrs. Ericson's sincerity, for he regarded her selfishness as too consuming to allow of affection for any one.

He did her an injustice to some extent, for what love she was capable of had been centred in him for years. In the beginning his attitude of merely respectful devotion had piqued her into tempting him, but his blindness to her advances had aroused both anger and passion in her. His later attitude of aloofness, touched with silent criticism, and at times with ill-concealed amusement, had been one of the hardest things she had ever been called upon to bear, for fertile though she was in expedients, it left her helpless. Mrs.

Ericson was one of those in whom love and hate strangely mingle to form passion, with jealousy as a natural accompaniment. The fact that Kyle had not married, and that so far as she could discover he appeared unattached, was a satisfaction; her own forty-four years, with the finger of time beginning to roughen her features, one of her many trials.

The thought of his coming interview with Mrs. Ericson had brought vividly to Kyle's mental vision the smiling face of the woman who had so coolly juggled with a girl's uttermost need, and then as coolly turned over to the calculating inspection of a lawyer the cry of desperation she had wrung from her. He understood Esther's exclamation, "And she could do *that!*" It found an echo in his own sense of repulsion; it was an act so devoid of ordinary womanly feeling. He wondered how Mrs. Ericson would explain it to him; his own object in going to her was to discover if possibly she might know something of Esther's whereabouts.

CHAPTER VII

KYLE was asked, as he had known he would be, to come up to Mrs. Ericson's own sitting-room, and there he found her before the fire. It was a room that in winter gave the impression of warmth, luxuriance, and color, and in the spring was cool, flower-scented, and restful. Just how Mrs. Ericson managed the difference in atmosphere Kyle did not know; it was a study in effect that was natural to her. He had come in out of a cold wind, the first really cold night of autumn, and the wood fire was exceedingly pleasant.

Mrs. Ericson had chosen for her seat this evening a small rocker that might have been intended for a child. It accentuated her naturally girlish appearance, and was invariably her choice when she had matters of business to discuss. Her attitude alone was calculated to disarm masculine acumen, and soothe aggressiveness. In general she preferred a large cushioned chair into which she could sink, her small slippered feet and silk-clad ankles so far lifted from the floor as to be distinctly visible.

Kyle was surprised to find that she was not alone. Her companion was a young woman Kyle had sometimes met at the Ericsons' and elsewhere, a Miss Margaret Acres. He had seen her now and then with Rutledge Ericson, and on one occasion he had himself been her dinner partner. Kyle had not seen her for a year or more, but as he shook hands with her he recalled the very definite impression she had made upon him. She embodied very nearly his conception of the neurotically inclined society girl, with the balance decidedly tipped on the side of sophistication and self-interest. Her manner was as suggestive of poise as her voice was of negligent

hauteur. She was tall and very blonde, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with regular features and a pallid skin. Kyle knew that in Mrs. Ericson's set she was regarded as both clever and handsome, a girl whose matrimonial opportunities would have been enhanced had her fortune been greater, her father's failure in business and his subsequent death having left herself and her mother in but moderate circumstances. He remembered having observed her particularly at the bridge table. She had played an exceedingly good game, absorbed but attentive, and at a compliment from him had remarked, "Of course; I can't afford to lose, you see." She was probably twenty-two, but appeared older, even in her maidenly gown of pale blue.

She was in marked contrast to the elder woman's warm effect. Mrs. Ericson was pronouncedly an Irish brunette, warm in coloring, her hair dark, her blue eyes somewhat round and dark-lashed. Her nose had a barely noticeable inclination to one side, and a desire to become red at the tip, and her mouth was undeniably crooked, the lips coarse. Her head was small and beautifully formed, the hair growing in a pretty wave at the back of the neck, and always closely dressed to accentuate the natural grace of the head. She was not beautiful, except in certain features; she was not even pretty, for the irregularities of her face were too pronounced, but the entire effect was both piquant and attractive; her expression was so bright, her voice tantalizing, and her eyes really handsome. She was short without giving the effect of dumpiness, for she had rather the figure of a young girl who is too well formed to be called slender. At night she looked thirty, but by daylight decidedly older, for the multitude of faint wrinkles that would rapidly deepen with time had begun to roughen her skin. This evening she was wearing dark red, low-necked, but cut rather high on the shoulders and pointed back and front, showing to advantage the back

of her white neck, and when she bent forward the hollow between her breasts, a studied combination of demureness and accidental immodesty.

On Kyle's entrance she half rose and turned to meet him, one knee still bent under her, much the position a very young girl might have taken. "Oh, I'm glad," she said. "You're earlier than I thought you would be—you know Miss Acres?"

"I have no idea what time it is," Kyle replied. "I came as soon as I could get off. . . . Your fire is agreeable, Maud."

"Isn't it," Margaret Acres remarked, comfortably. "I have been lingering beside it a good deal longer than I should—I am due at the Floyd-Kaufmans' now."

"Nonsense, Margaret!" Mrs. Ericson exclaimed. "They won't begin to play as early as this. Have a cigarette with us first. . . . Robert, you'll find whiskey and things on the table there beside you."

"Nothing, thank you," Kyle said, "but I'll smoke."

Margaret Acres was observing him deliberately. "Have you been to Europe, or are you engaged to some one, Mr. Kyle?" she inquired. "I haven't seen you for a long time."

"No," Kyle said, smiling at her. "I have been busy—nothing more interesting than that."

"Maud, is he telling the truth?"

"I know as much about it as you do, Margaret," Mrs. Ericson replied, laughing. "Perhaps if you persevere we'll find out." She looked up brightly from her low seat, opening her red silk fan, and holding it so as to protect her face from the fire.

She had asked Margaret Acres to dine with her for the very purpose of diverting Kyle somewhat before they would have to talk seriously. She knew his face would wear exactly the stern expression it did when he first entered, and she wanted to accomplish her purpose without arousing his anger too soon. Maud Ericson had spent several of her hours

that day as she had ever known, and brought herself to a difficult decision. From the shadow of her fan she watched Kyle absorbedly, her eyes dwelling on the lines about his mouth, the powerful muscles in his neck, the breadth of his shoulders, and his full chest. It was what she had always loved in him, that physical vigor. He looked as if he could lift her between his finger and thumb and break her. His brain she respected, even feared, but his body she adored.

If she failed to soothe the determined antagonism that was clearly written on his face, if he left her that night unsoftened, it would be the last time he would ever enter her presence. His disapprobation of her had been steadily growing for years, and it had needed less than this ugly tangle and her equivocal position to turn him from her entirely. . . . She must have her letters back now they had accomplished her purpose, she must win Kyle to a neutral frame of mind if nothing more, but even if he left her that night avowedly her enemy, she must still stand by her position; if she was to steer her course through the difficulties that surrounded her, and bring her vessel into the harbor she craved, she dared not allow lesser interests to influence her.

The heat of the fire and her thoughts turned her a little sick, and she moved back from the hearth. The other two were not noticing her; Margaret Acres had made Kyle laugh.

"No, really I have a tin bank, and am going to Europe next week on my winnings and my savings," she was saying, in her languid voice. "I had been having beastly luck and Saint Joseph wouldn't hear me, so I bought this bank in a toy shop; it's a green hippopotamus. You press a button and the hippo sticks out a red tongue, takes your money, whips it out of sight, and shuts its jaws with a snap. It's pathetic the amount of gold coin that animal swallows—it's literally stuffed with gold. When it won't rattle any more

you unscrew a large section of its stomach, and behold! I'm rich! I never was so opulent in my life."

Kyle's attractive smile was for the girl, and Mrs. Ericson saw it and forgot caution. "Any one but yourself have access to your hippo, Margaret?" she asked, with her crooked smile.

A touch of color appeared in the girl's pale cheeks, and she moved a little, her cool glance on the elder woman. "No. Why, do you want to feed him?"

"Only a chocolate drop or two—occasionally." Mrs. Ericson was still smiling.

"I can't loan him," said the girl, still more drawlingly. "The beast's so liable to indigestion. He's so human, that hippo." She turned back to Kyle, who was observing the two women gravely. "You know family disagreeables always upset him. He gets wrinkled and red in the nose, and positively malicious, poor little beast! . . . But I must leave you both—and the fire—Floyd's electric must be here by now."

She rose as she spoke, the tail of her eye on the woman in her infantile chair. Mrs. Ericson smiled still more crookedly, but, to Kyle's surprise, controlled herself. If his mind had not been so full of Esther and the object of his visit, he would have been amused, particularly when Mrs. Ericson was moved by an excess of politeness, and went with her guest to see that she was well wrapped up. When she returned she carefully closed the door into the hall, drawing the portieres across the entrance. Her color was heightened, her eyes shining, as she came up to the fire again.

"You didn't tell us how cold it was, Robert," she said. "That girl had only a flimsy opera cloak. She'll have pneumonia instead of going to Europe with her hippopotamus. It's a good name for Allen Floyd-Kaufman, I must say!"

"Not being acquainted with the latest titbits of gossip, I remain ignorant," Kyle remarked, dryly. He knew from

Mrs. Ericson's tone that she was very angry, and guessed at another passage of arms that had occurred beyond his hearing.

Mrs. Ericson laughed shortly. "Oh, Floyd and the nonentity—that's his wife, one is always forgetting her—are to chaperon Margaret in Europe. The hippopotamus came into play very conveniently, for we all know the real condition of Margaret's exchequer. Floyd's affair with her is furnishing the latest subject for bets. We're wondering whether Floyd or the nonentity will begin proceedings."

Mrs. Ericson was rarely so untactful, or vulgar, in Kyle's presence, but her anger at the girl's gibe had for the moment thrown her off her guard. Kyle looked at her with a mixture of contempt and surprise. How had he managed to spend hours in her society? Either age had coarsened her and made her unlovely, or he had grown more fastidious.

"It doesn't matter particularly, does it?" he inquired, his look cold. "I have had a long day, and must get home—suppose we talk business. What did you want to see me about, Maud?"

Her expression changed and she composed herself at once. She bent well forward, her carefully considered attitude, one elbow on the arm of her chair, the other hand holding her fan.

"It's that wretched affair of Rutledge's," she said, gravely, her eyes on Kyle's. "It has worried me beyond anything. I thought I had settled matters for us all when I paid that dreadful Mrs. Rieloff what she demanded, and now the girl is making trouble. . . . Did Mr. Burnham tell you everything?"

"All he knew, I think—and he turned the papers over to me."

"It's awfully good of you to give your time to it, Robert," Mrs. Ericson said, gratefully. "I wish I could have gone to you in the first place, but of course I had to go to Mr.

Burnham. You see, Mrs. Rieloff told me she had said very little to Mr. Burnham, and I jumped to the conclusion that I could settle with her myself, and the whole thing would be dropped without bringing him into the matter. Mr. Burnham has had so many of our family bothers to take care of that he has a bad enough opinion of Rutledge anyway. I ought not to have touched it myself, but as I did I should have explained it to Mr. Burnham. I was foolish, just a bit of cowardice on my part. I was afraid he would scold me about the money."

"You paid Mrs. Rieloff well," Kyle remarked. "You must have felt there was a good reason for pacifying her."

Mrs. Ericson shifted her position slightly. "I did—at that time—and she frightened me. Oh, she is dreadful! She threatened all sorts of things, newspaper publicity, a suit in court, everything. I'm not so easily frightened, but she did frighten me." She shivered. "She was going to some low lawyer, and make a big case of it, and I was willing to pay her a good deal to avoid that, but I felt too that the whole thing was dreadful of Rutledge, and though of course he couldn't marry a girl like that, I wanted to make amends to what extent I could. I was in a difficult position, for Rutledge was so ill at the time that I couldn't talk to him—the doctors said any excitement might be fatal to him—so I had to do what I could alone. But the real thing was that the woman made me believe their story, and I was so uncertain, and worried—everything taken together—that I was willing to pay her high just to get rid of her. Of course if I had had my usual wits about me, I might have known enough not to believe them or to trust any promises they made."

"Miss Rieloff made?" Kyle inquired.

"That the woman made for her," Mrs. Ericson replied, with a touch of asperity. She did not like the quiet assurance

of his question, and she liked the trend of his next remark still less.

"Rutledge doesn't seem to have appeared in the matter at all."

"Rutledge was terribly ill, he is not well yet," Mrs. Ericson said, reproachfully. "He came near dying, Robert. Mr. Burnham must have told you that Rutledge wrote to him about the matter as soon as he was able. He wanted me to act for him."

"Yes," Kyle said, "I know, and of course you consulted with him?"

"Certainly—but I tried to save him all I could—particularly since I have understood things better, and know that their main accusation is not true. I am his mother, what would you expect of me?" Her voice was indignant, the attitude of the insulted mother. "Why are you questioning Rutledge's position—though of course you don't know the truth of it all as I do now—I keep forgetting that." Her manner had quieted as she concluded.

"I am not in the position of criticising," Kyle said, evenly. "Please do not misunderstand me, but there are one or two things I want straightened out to my satisfaction—I never go into a thing blindly if I can help it. . . . Those letters, Maud, just when did you receive them? Some time before Mrs. Rieloff appeared I think you told Mr. Burnham?"

Mrs. Ericson looked for an unwinking moment into Kyle's clear eye, and took a mental side step. "Oh, no, I certainly didn't tell him that, for the letters didn't come until weeks after Mrs. Rieloff was here. What I meant to tell Mr. Burnham was that Mrs. Rieloff made the same allegations to me that the girl does in her letters. She claimed that Rutledge had wronged her daughter, and I believed her at the time, and paid her well. It was that that made me make terms with her."

"She made no such allegation to Mr. Burnham," Kyle said.

"She reserved it for my ears then," Mrs. Ericson retorted. Kyle drew an audible breath. "Thank you," he said.

Mrs. Ericson could make nothing at all of his expression, but there were a few things she herself wished to know before she went further.

"Of course," she said, "as I told Mr. Burnham in my letter, the girl's story is a fabrication, she is simply after a little more money—has she been often to the office, Robert?"

"Twice, I believe—the other day, and this morning."

"Did she talk with you?"

"No," Kyle said. "She had rather a long talk with Mr. Burnham. She appeared to know nothing whatever of your transaction with Mrs. Rieloff. I think Mr. Burnham was very sorry for her."

"Of course!" Mrs. Ericson exclaimed. "I could tell by her letter that she would be clever enough to manage all that. . . . Did you see her, Robert?"

"Yes, for a moment—as she left the office." His lips had come together, his chin lifting.

"What did you think of her?"

"Is it necessary to ask me that? You have seen her!" She had drawn a flash of anger from him. His brows came together as he looked at her.

"Only for a short time, when I went to get Rutledge," she returned, very quietly. "I was too worried over his condition to pay much attention to her. All I could do was to send her home. If I thought of her at all, I thought she was a foolish thing with a pretty face. I did her an injustice—she's really clever—cleverer than Mrs. Rieloff. . . . How did she take her talk with Mr. Burnham—he told her he had her letters, of course?"

Kyle found it very difficult to answer her. "I think from

what Mr. Burnham told me she was—was astounded that you could show a letter like that of hers to you to—to anybody.”

She paid no attention to his manner; her eyes were very bright in the shadow of her fan.

“And I suppose he showed her, or told her of Rutledge’s letter as well? She raised a scene, of course, and rushed out?”

There was an undercurrent of such perfect assurance and settled satisfaction in her simulated question that Kyle remained speechless. Being a man, and in the position of a lawyer, he must answer her civilly, if at all. He had a more definite impression than he had had before he caught the note of satisfaction in her voice, that Mr. Burnham had done with the letters she had sent him exactly what she had meant he should do when she sent them. If she could have hit upon a still more ingenious or bolder method of goading to madness the girl her son had wronged, she would have seized gladly upon it. Even his astuteness was dumb before an ingenuity that relied so confidently on the force of circumstances and accurate judgment of character. Mr. Burnham was right when he said in his anger that it would not matter to Mrs. Ericson were Esther driven to the street. He would have been nearer the truth if he had said that she wished her there, or anywhere where she would sink out of sight. There was a motive behind it all that Kyle could not fathom, a juggling with Esther’s need, and a security in her attitude to Mrs. Rieloff that was beyond his understanding. If he had not looked into Esther’s face that morning he would have risen on the moment and in one sentence have disconnected himself with any part in the unrevealed motives that were actuating the woman before him. He had no mind to be used as Mr. Burnham had been. He felt a certainty that he would be forced to withdraw from the position Mr. Burn-

ham had turned over to him. The pretence of guarding the Ericsons' interests when every particle of sympathy he possessed was enlisted in Esther's cause, was not alluring to him. It was his pity for helplessness, and sympathy with misfortune, that had impelled him in the beginning, and they counselled him now to wait a little. He might see some point of advantage to be gained for Esther, that would not conflict with his position.

He had not answered Mrs. Ericson's assertion, but after a moment's pause in which she also appeared to be considering, she asked, "Where is she, Robert? Where is she staying—where did she go?"

"I don't know," Kyle replied. "She gave Mr. Burnham no address, and we felt anxious about her, so much so that we have been searching for her all day."

"Oh," she said, with a peculiar intonation, "you were afraid she might do away with herself? . . . Pray dismiss any such thought from your mind. She is a very good actress, good enough to deceive two men at any rate." Kyle flushed dully, and was about to answer, but she stopped him with a gesture. "Oh, I know, Robert, you're very sure, but there is not *one bit of truth in her story*, except that Rutledge asked her to marry him, and intended to do so until he discovered what she was, and I've paid her well for that broken promise. He never harmed her in *any particular*, and she can't prove that he did." She bent further over touching Kyle's knee with her fan, her face grown scarlet, her manner deadly earnest. "*I tell you it is false*, what she says in her letter. She and that Rieloff woman are two bad women. I am not afraid of that girl—not an iota. I didn't have any hesitation in showing her letter to Mr. Burnham—why should I? The whole thing on the face of it is a theatrical bit of work, gotten up for effect! The idea of Mr. Burnham's taking it seriously—and you! I know perfectly what she

wants, but we owe her *nothing*—and she shall *have nothing* from either one of us!”

The whole speech was delivered with passionate force and apparent conviction. Kyle stared at her in a sort of stupefaction, his instinctive recognition of truth for the moment nonplussed. Then the dull red grew in his face, dying it almost purple. He got to his feet, and stood upright.

“Maud, you know that every word of that girl’s letter was *true*.”

“I have just told you it was a *lie*,” she said, with blazing eyes.

“Does Rutledge stand with you in that?” he asked.

“Certainly.”

“Very well,” Kyle said, slowly, “I am glad our conference is over.” He took his hat from the table, and stood holding it, his eyes on the floor, his air preoccupied. Mrs. Ericson watched him, her lips parted; she also had risen. “I will send you those papers in the morning,” Kyle said at length, “and I shall explain to Mr. Burnham how matters stand. Mr. Burnham seemed to think that if Miss Rieloff chose she could make serious trouble—his judgment was the same as mine: that it would be best to locate her and treat her with—consideration. We were agreed on this point, and I cannot have anything more to do with the thing as Mr. Burnham’s representative, because the position you take is to my mind—untenable. Judging from all I have been able to gather, both from the papers you turned over to me and from our conversation this evening, you are taking a course I cannot approve. The truth is I am not fitted to advise you in cold blood, and so I have no business with the thing anyway, and will say good-night.”

He had turned to the door, but she was before him in an instant.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Do?" he said, halting and looking down at her. "Go home and go to bed, I hope."

"You know well enough what I *mean*, Robert! What are you going to do about that girl?"

He continued to look at her, the light growing in his eyes. "Find her—if it's a possibility!"

"And then?" she demanded, hotly.

"Do what any other decent human being would do—see that she's cared for."

Her brows lowered for a moment in fury, her face convulsed; then her expression changed. "You don't believe me?" she said, with quivering lips.

"No—that's the whole trouble—I don't believe you," Kyle answered, simply.

She lifted her hands in appeal. "No," she entreated. "Don't say that—it's cruel! I've seen for a long time that you have mistrusted me. You always feel so sure of things, Robert, but no one has a right to judge another, for how can they *know* they are right. What do you know of the difficulties I have had to labor under, of what I have had to endure." She came closer, her hand on his arm. "I have done the best I could in this trouble of Rutledge's and how much do you really know about it—nothing. He is my son, and I must stand by him in spite of everything—you don't know my reasons—how *can* you judge then?"

She had stopped, her voice lost in the tears that choked her. Kyle looked down at her in growing distress, his judgment for the time in abeyance.

"Maud——" he said, a little uncertainly.

She began to speak again, her voice gaining more strength. "I—I'm bitter sometimes—I've seen so much of the ugly side of things—I've had to—but I hate myself when I am like that. I don't always do right—but would you judge a

man harshly under the same circumstances? I have tried hard to—to be—to do as you would approve, for your criticism has hurt me more than anything else in the world——” Her hands had stolen to his shoulder, but he was too genuinely distressed to notice it.

“I haven’t meant to criticise you,” he declared, “but there are some things I just cannot swallow—we look at things differently and that’s only natural. . . . Just let’s let the thing rest——”

“I can’t lose your friendship, Robert,” she pleaded. “You know you meant a moment ago never to enter my door again.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Isn’t there one spark of the old—of kindly feeling left for me——? . . . I can’t live without a little of it——” Kyle had looked about him, and at the door somewhat helplessly, but it was her touch at his neck that aroused him. He drew back with a sudden lift of his head, and catching her hands drew them down.

“Maud!” he cried, his eyes blazing. He held her wrists for a moment in his grip, then dropped them. “Good Lord,” he said, beneath his breath, and with infinite scorn, “what a last effort!”

She turned and faced him at the door, white and shaking, her arms outspread to bar the way. “If you take that girl under your protection, I’ll make you both a by-word,” she said, distinctly. “I will do it if it takes every cent of the money Mrs. Rieloff was not bright enough to know how to get hold of. . . . I give you fair warning!”

Kyle took a step forward, and lifting her out of his path as he would a child, he opened the door and passed out, but as he went down the stairs her high laugh followed him, repeating her insult; it came to him until he closed the front door on it. The harsh wind and the continuous bellow of the city, the chill of reality, struck like a dash of cold water

upon his hot senses. His burning anger retreated to the innermost place where resolve is formed. If it was possible to angle in that swirling chaos of humanity and bring to the surface the submerged leaf before it was sucked into the maelstrom, he would do it. He would do it to the confounding of that laughing woman behind him. . . . But into what part of the mighty whirlpool should he cast his fly? Where in all that sullen roar was Esther?

CHAPTER VIII

AND where in that sullen roar was Esther?

She had run from Mr. Burnham's office like a creature wrapped in flame; the fire had sprung upon her there, it clung to her, burning her, smothering her. "I am sorry enough I ever knew any one by that name—I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name—I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name" was all she heard, all she knew; her brain was capable only of repeating the words, of grasping one meaning; the fear that had lain in her during all those long weeks of waiting had its answer in that one sentence, "I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name." It was not his mother who kept him from her, it was his own will; it was her hidden terror realized.

But it burned her, tortured her. Her eyes saw only a long white tunnel along which she must run, at the end of which might be air, or a touch of something that might cool her agony. "I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name—I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name." The corridor bent twice, and Esther of necessity turned with it. In her blind onward rush she walked like a drunken woman into the blank wall; she groped, and turned, and hurried on. The corridor ended at last at a lettered door, but leading off from it was a narrow passage, and into it Esther went; somewhere, at some distant place must be relief. But the passage was short, ending in a jog, a depository for an immense coil of fire hose. At the height of a man's head was a small, square window, framing a patch of cloudless sky; she had reached the end. She crowded into the corner, her hands gripping the window ledge as if to draw her face up to the cool October air, gasping, and gasping again for breath. She could go no farther, and behind her the corridor was on fire.

She clung to the window with her fingers, choking, strangling, at first merely a struggle against physical torment, the aching pressure on her burning brain. Then the incessant hammering of the words that had pursued her evolved fuller meaning; word by word, the other sentences of his letter took shape. Mr. Burnham's look, his words, the meaning of the whole interview—she was repudiated, forsaken, her heart laid bare for any hand to touch, any eye to see, she was left to travel a terrible road alone. It was the terror, the unbelievable thing that had been slowly creeping upon her during those months of realization and waiting. Now it was here.

Her fingers were too stiff to hold any longer, and she dropped to the coil of hose, her face sunk to her knees, her hands clasped behind her neck, and time passed over her. Her thoughts went back to the beginning, registering impressions as in a dream; she had lost control of its wanderings. Words, gestures, meanings; the silent demand of glance, of touch, to which that something within her had answered even when fear had whispered; the hour beside the river when she had believed and given herself to his caresses; then the few days of yielding to trust and happiness, and that last night when they were alone in the storm, when besieged, close pressed, struggling, the traitor within her had arisen and turned the key upon will. . . . Every atom of her flesh lived over again that night of passion, his lips at her ear, "If we want to be happy whose concern is it when or how we do it? . . . To-night we can please ourselves—to-morrow we will satisfy other people. What difference do a few hours make—the thing that matters is our own intention, our promise to each other—you're my wife this minute as much as if he had prayed over us for hours—our own will is the thing that counts," and the traitor within her, her own desire, had led her to believe. His will had been his law, and her will,

untaught by experience, untrained to duty, and bewildered by false precepts, had yielded to his demand. Esther could reason only vaguely upon the impulses that had brought her to tragedy, she was only a child-woman of seventeen, but she knew now that Rutledge had argued wrongly, and she had wanted in power to resist.

And who was to suffer for their act? Not he. She? Yes, but the child beneath her breast most of all. They did not care, he and his mother; they had thrown them out into the street; they even set the law upon her that she might not trouble them with her pleadings. And it was he who had kissed the breath from her lips, smothered her with his pleading and his promises! He had meant it at the moment, he had meant it up to the time when they turned sharp upon the torn place in the road, and they had stood erect for one moment before being thrown. He had looked at her then, and the terror in his eyes had been for her, his look had held love.

It was that recollection that had sustained her through terrible weeks of waiting. She had been too ignorant to understand that such love as his only lived a short time, that it was only because she was there at his side and passion was still warm in him. What he had called love was not love at all. With him it did not live through the weeks of illness, the pressure of his mother's influence, the suggestions of wealth and worldly counsel. It was that. That was the reason he could bring himself to write, "I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name." He had simply ceased to want her more than he wanted anything else. She had given herself to him, he had tasted satisfaction, there was not in him the love that endures, that may suffer, and forgive, and continue. . . . And with her, how was it? The months of secret terror crowned by the last hours of fuller realization had numbed every feeling but one; no amount of suffering

could dim the knowledge that she had given him all she possessed as fully as if she was his wife. He had received that from her, a bond that held her to him, and the child was hers and his. Esther thought all this vaguely, incompletely, but the germs of knowledge and reasoning lay in her ready to grow and yield fruit in the future.

The hours it took the sun to climb to midday, then to decline until it shone full through the window upon Esther's bent head, served to draw her out of bewildered misery to a recognition of the old reiterated throb of pain, an urging that lifted again and surmounted the first overwhelming sense of betrayal and abandonment. It was the same acute agony that had made vivid her appeal to Mrs. Ericson. In wilful ignorance she had committed a crime against an innocent being—which way could she turn, what was there she could do? It was the sense of personal responsibility that had been growing in her for months. It dragged her up now from despair, brought her as it were staggering to her feet, her face set forward, the same power of will that had made it impossible for her to harm her body, that had brought her through weeks of misery, and given her strength to come to Mr. Burnham, the only possible means she knew of reaching Rutledge without his mother's knowledge. That hope had failed her utterly, and in a manner that had cut her to the quick of suffering, driving her frantic with pain, but when she had lived through that hurt the other continuous throb reasserted itself, an aching misery over the wrong she had done another who would live to suffer as she was suffering. The realization of it, the pain of it, had been with her so long that it was part of herself.

She sat crouched on her low seat, her head raised now, her arms about her knees, her eyes on the floor. What could she do? She was still living, breathing; the only thing that had happened to her was the destruction of her last hope.

She could not go back to River Road—Mrs. Rieloff had at last turned her out. When not too completely enveloped in her misery Esther had wondered at the conduct of the woman during those months. Mrs. Rieloff had received her after the accident and cared for her, keeping the house exactly as she did before Mr. Rieloff had been taken away. She had refrained from anything but ordinary questioning, receiving Esther's story of the elopement without surprise, censure, or abuse; her air was more that of one who pondered some interest of her own. In July she had gone to New York, only a three days' absence, the occasion when she had visited Mr. Burnham and threatened Mrs. Ericson. She had returned to River Road again and gone on with her duties, speaking no unnecessary word to Esther. From that time she had worn a quietly determined aspect as if abiding her time, or acting under orders. There were days when she appeared to restrain herself with difficulty, but she succeeded in merely looking her detestation and her knowledge of Esther's condition. In the last weeks Esther had gone about oblivious of everything but her dumb misery. She could no longer endure Mrs. Rieloff's eyes and the silence of the house. Mr. Rieloff's empty chair stared at her; if the old man had been there how quickly she would have taken her trouble and shame to him, begged him to find a way for her. He had suffered enough to understand her wretchedness. She spent her days on the hillside and by the river. If Mrs. Ericson and Mrs. Rieloff had combined to form a plan that was calculated to drive an imaginative, passionate girl to the last act of desperation, they could not have been more ingenious. But Esther possessed a singular tenacity, a power of endurance that without intelligence is merely apathy, the stoicism of the peasant. Her keen imagination made the last degree of suffering possible, but when tortured nerves were at last numb, the point at which reason fails, she still possessed the

power to endure that had been given her by inheritance. It was the birthright of a peasantry that had plodded and dumbly endured for centuries.

It was that quality that had made it possible for her to wait, to watch hour after hour for a word, a line from her lover. It had led her to appeal to Mrs. Ericson, and still wait, and linger. Her little sum of money, Mr. Rieloff's gift, hung around her neck, a secret shared with no one; in the end, when she could wait no longer, it would carry her to New York, to the old Russian woman, the only woman she knew in the city.

She studied Mr. Rieloff's little map of the city, learning the streets, fitting her small knowledge of location to them, her brain coming at last to the assistance of blind endurance, helping her to plan. She would go directly to the old woman, and ask to share her room for a time. The woman might be kind to her and then what matter if the room was close and dirty, and the Elevated tore before the window. She had slept under a pile of rags in a worse room, until Mr. Rieloff had found her.

For some reason the stress of those last months had brought forth forgotten incidents from her memory; there were sights and sounds that came to her out of her childhood. She would rather sleep in a den with a creature beside her who might give a word of sympathy, than to lie on her white bed with Mrs. Rieloff close to her. She could go to the old woman, she must go to her, and then find Mr. Burnham. Through him she might reach Rutledge without his mother's knowledge, for in those last weeks Esther had evolved the conviction that it was Mrs. Ericson who kept Rutledge from her. In her inner consciousness was the knowledge of a selfishness and weakness in her lover that might make such a thing possible. Then at last Mrs. Rieloff had spoken. She only said that in a day or two she herself would leave the

cottage; she intended to rent it and Esther must find something to do. She could no longer support her, for the little money Mr. Rieloff had left was gone. That was all—no vituperation, no hint that she knew Esther's need. Esther had heard her in silence, wondering why Mrs. Rieloff had not turned her out long before. But Mrs. Rieloff had decided for her, had brought her courage to the point. She would go back to the slums out of which she had come in the beginning. She would go to Mr. Burnham and make her last effort. And if it failed her——? Esther had not been able to think beyond that possibility. . . . Before daylight the next morning she was at the red-roofed station; she had stolen from the cottage without a word.

And now the possibility had become an actuality. Rutledge had repudiated her and then put the ocean between them. He had turned his back on her, knowing what he did, what she had confessed to him in her letter. He had left her and his child helpless, when but for a few hours and a few unspoken words she would have been legally his wife, as she was now in reality. And his only wish was that he had never seen her! The waves of fire swept her almost into unconsciousness again. That terrible thing she could not even now believe of him. It was unthinkable. . . . She must go back to the old Jewish woman who sat all day and sewed, and beg her to keep her, to care for her in the time that was coming. There was no one else to whom she could go. Without money she would be on the street, but what she had would make things possible for a time. The very poor must have bread—the old woman would take her if she offered money. She would not question or censure as the more fortunate would be sure to do. It was one of the knowledges drawn from Esther's childhood among the terribly poor.

She must save, work as the old woman was working, bent from morning till night over men's garments, stitching with

hurried fingers, taking from one pile of garments to build up another. Esther could see her where she sat close to the dirty window. The room had two windows, and Esther would sit at the other. Early in the morning she would have to go with the old woman and carry her bundle of finished garments to the shop, bringing back another pile upon which she would toil all day. When she and Mr. Rieloff stayed that one well remembered week in Washington Square she had seen the piece-women pass under her window in the early mornings, walking in a long line, each bearing on her head a burden that would have bent the back of a strong man. They walked every day, their shawls pinned about them, shivering in the cold, panting in the heat. She had passed them once and looked into their faces and their eyes looked dully at her, like a cow's, but not so peacefully, for they were tired. She could walk with them for they would not point a finger at her.

The old Russian woman had been born in a hut with a mud floor, and had worked in the fields like an ox; here she lived in a house where there were twenty other Jewish families. She would ask few questions, care little whether Esther was a wife or not. And Esther would grow into an automaton like the old woman, and her child would run the streets, and sit on dirty doorsteps just as she herself had done—brought into the world as she had been without name or home. She could see no hope for that little child anywhere.

The sun had dropped beneath the window ledge, and her corner was suddenly cold, for the wind had risen in the late afternoon, bringing clouds with it. They scudded across the patch of sky above her. The thought of coming darkness and the hurrying figures on the street, urged along by the confused roar of the city, struck across Esther's consciousness, stiffening her as she sat. The grime, the rush, the ceaseless bellow of the street were echoed from Esther's child-

hood. She recognized the sights, the sounds, as seen and felt before, but the terror of unaccustomed sensations was upon her, and the loneliness of space builded upon and crowded with life in which she had no share, no place. The terror of it lifted her to her feet. Some one might come upon her in her corner and demand what she did there. In all the long hours she had never once thought of that. She must go.

Her limbs hung to her body like weights, and she bent over, rubbing them into life. The movements stirred her slow blood. She had sat all those hours beneath an open window, and the air had grown sharp. She must go again among people. Her fingers struggled with her veil, drawing it close about her face. She could stand now and walk. As she went uncertainly along the passage that turned into the corridor, she remembered how it was she had come up; she must keep on until she reached the elevator that would take her down. When she came into the street she must turn to the right, going straight on till she reached Broadway and then cross the street. Then she must turn a little to her left, the church would be at her right, and a block farther on would be the stairway of the Elevated. It was the way she had come, she would recognize it.

There were other girls hurrying along beside her in the corridor, and crowding the elevator. The narrow street below was jammed—a man who passed her was saying to his companion, "No, it's past five." The street lamps were lit, gradually overcoming the gloom; it would be quite dark when she reached Bleecker Street. She would have one block then to walk, with the cars running above her head, and close to the corner was the stairway that would take her up to the Russian woman's room. There was a Chinese laundry on one side of it and a basement on the other side where men and women picked over huge piles of papers and rags. If she stood a moment and looked she might see the lights in Wash-

ington Square, three blocks away. She would not lose her way, but she must count the stations; Bleecker Street was the sixth.

The car was crowded and she stood close to the door, watching to see the names of the stations. When they reached Bleecker Street there were others who hurried through the gateway of the platform and ran down the stairs into the mirky street below, but she went slowly for she was dizzy now. At the bottom of the stairs she turned in the right direction for she stood still long enough to be sure; then she went on. It had grown too cold for people to stand about on the pavement; all were hurrying.

For one moment her heart stood still with fright, for she was uncertain of the stairway; there was a closed door where it should be, and the rag-picker's basement was dark. But the laundry was there, and she ventured to push open the closed door. The stairway was there, leading up through darkness to a wavering gas jet on the landing above. The sour smell of stale cooking and crowded humanity came to her as she climbed. It was a vivid reminder of the days when she was so small that she climbed interminable steps, clinging with hands and knees to keep from falling back into space. There were two flights, two dim landings, from which ran long narrow halls and the door of the Jewish woman's room was close to the stairway. Esther knocked and entered.

Coming in out of the chill the room seemed close and hot, and Esther was swept with a nausea that lifted the floor beneath her feet. She leaned against the door, struggling for breath, the moisture coming on lip and brow. The old woman sat at a work table, a pile of unfinished garments as high as her chair beside her. There was a dingy red kerchief wound about her head and tied under her chin, framing a withered brown face, the skin of which was like leather, crossed and recrossed by innumerable wrinkles. There were

no brows, and the small opaque eyes were wide set and hidden beneath folded lids. The hooked nose only was eager, overshadowing a sunken mouth and heavy chin. Her mouth moved incessantly as she worked, drawn by the continuous jerking of facial muscles. She was the Russian peasant woman, translated in old age to strange surroundings. The room was the abode of the piece-worker, a scrap of carpet in the centre of the floor, a cook stove that served for heat as well, a work table, bed and cot. It was a tenement room in an old building, battered, grimy, littered with scraps of cloth and bits of threads. The Elevated thundered directly across the windows, but the room was not small, and the windows were high. It was a better place than most.

The old woman looked up at the girl who clung to the door, but her fingers kept on with her work. "You are back? It is night?" she said, in Yiddish. She spoke the words slowly as if they were mothered by a sluggish brain.

"Yes," Esther answered, "I could not come before."

The old woman's eyes went back to her work, she must not stop before the pile at her knee was done; she sat over it, her back bent into a curve. Esther moved from the door and crossed to where she sat. There had been nothing in the woman's tone to move her, it was wholly apathetic, but something rose suddenly in Esther's throat and choked her. In all those long terrible hours it was the only woman's voice she had heard, the only mother creature that had spoken to her. There must be pity in her. She crept to the woman's side and laid her head on her lap, her hands rising to the withered neck, touching it, then clinging to it.

"Mother, I have done wrong—I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it." She said 'mother' in Yiddish, a strangled cry.

The woman looked down on the bent head. "Aye?" she said vaguely.

"I did not know. . . . I loved him and he said I was

his wife, but I did wrong. I did wrong from the beginning. I should not have listened——” and Esther told her story as she had told it to Mrs. Ericson, the truth as she knew it, felt it, finding words that would make it plain to the slow brain to which she was appealing.

The old woman listened, her mouth working, her eyes dull. “Aye,” she said, again, and after a long pause, “it is always so. . . . He has thrown you out. . . . But if there is no money, what then? Without money there is nothing for you—it is he has the money, therefore the power.”

“I can do nothing—I know it. I must stay here and work. Mother, let me stay here—I know no one but you—be kind to me——”

The old woman’s wrinkled forehead lifted into furrows. “I haf no money——” Those were words she could say very well in English. “I haf no money,” she repeated, sullenly. She moved back from the clinging hands.

“No, but listen,” Esther begged. “I will work here with you, I also can sew, I can help you carry the things, every week I will pay you for the room and food, and when I am . . . when I cannot work I will pay you more then. . . . Mother, be kind, let me stay?”

There was but one appeal the woman could comprehend. “I haf no money,” she repeated stubbornly. “*I haf no money*—that is plain to thee.”

“But I have some—Mr. Rieloff—gave me——” Esther said, chokingly. “Mother, I have said I would pay——”

“What you call ‘some’?” the woman asked, suspiciously.

“I have two hundred dollars—I will work also and pay for all I need, if you let me stay.” Esther spoke more clearly. She had taken her hands from the woman’s neck.

“Two hundred dollars!” the old woman repeated, in Yiddish. Her toothless mouth fell until it was agape.

"Yes," Esther said, dully. She rose to her feet, grasping the table and leaning against it, for she felt very sick.

"Where haf you—in the bank, it?"

"No—here," Esther said, touching her breast. The woman's face swam before her eyes. "I will give you each week some if you let me stay—but you must promise to take care of me when I am ill—I and the baby."

"Aye," the woman promised, excitement under her words. "You must haf—doctor, medicines!" The garment upon which she sewed had fallen to the floor. "It will take much money."

"I must lie down," Esther said. She crept to the cot, bent over and swaying, and lay down with her arm across her face. The woman followed her, cringing.

"You feel sick?" she asked, with respect.

"I have eaten nothing all day," Esther said, scarcely above a whisper. "Only coffee this morning."

"I make you something—coffee and bread." She hurried about clattering her feet as if she wore wooden shoes.

Esther took what she brought, swallowing with difficulty, then eating hungrily. "I get you some meat if you like?" the woman offered. "I will go to the store." She spoke partly Yiddish, partly English, her sluggish brain stirred by excitement.

"No," Esther said. "I will eat what you eat—always. I will sew here with you every day. I must earn money too, but I shall pay also—for my bed and my food, and to stay."

"You need not work with so much money," the woman declared, and Esther turned away to the wall. When the money was gone—what then?

CHAPTER IX

"You go too fast," the old Jewish woman muttered under her shawl.

She had stopped to adjust the pile of garments she carried, and Esther dropped back to her side, standing patiently until the woman was ready to go on. She bore a high piled bundle on her own head, the burden so adjusted that it shaded her face. Her shawl was pinned closely to cover her mouth, only her eyes were uncovered and looked straight before her. She did not answer the woman. She stood still, then moved on when the other did.

They had crossed Fourth Street, and turned into the Square, walking slowly. The sun had risen high enough to cast slanting rays across the Square, touching the pale leaf buds of the trees, and the oozing sod below. They set the wet asphalt a gleam, and danced in the iridescent puddles; it was a drenched world still shaking off the raindrops of an early shower. The sky above the housetops was washed clean, an immeasurable blue dotted with puffs of white, but Esther walked on, looking straight before her, erect, unsmiling, unconscious of Spring. She went a step ahead as if dragging at the woman behind her.

The man who approached eyed them curiously. He had passed other groups of women, and walked slowly by them, glancing at the features their shawls half concealed. His look was piercing, a black eye that searched and then suddenly fastened on what it sought, gripping it as it were. The piece-women stared at him, one or two of them even turned to look after him, then went on with a muttered word in Italian or Yiddish. He was a slender man, lightly built, wearing

still, in the early morning, the dress clothes of the night before. He might have been taken for an astonishingly late reveller on his way home if his eye had not been so clear, and his air collected. His overcoat was thrown back, showing an extent of white shirt-bosom and an immaculate tie, his silk hat was set a little back on his abundant gray hair. His narrow, aquiline face was lined, the wrinkles at the corners of his quick-glancing eyes deeply marked, and yet there was an air of youth about him, a something intensely virile that revealed itself in his red-lipped mouth and springy step. He looked the middle aged man out for an early stroll—on closer inspection, a youth with an aging face bent on an adventure. His quick-moving eyes looked out on the waking city, observant, indifferent, then suddenly alive. The policeman on the corner touched his helmet to him, and he lifted to his hat the cane he carried, a half ironical, half amused greeting. "To bed," he said, pointing across the Square, and the policeman grinned, but not derisively.

"Ye're early, sir."

The other shrugged—the Frenchman's shrug. He was heading for Washington Arch, directly across the Square, but the piece-women were coming down Fourth Street, walking in scattered groups, and he turned abruptly that he might pass them. The Russian woman and Esther came last. The girl was silent, but the old woman was muttering.

"You go too fast," she complained, beneath her shawl. "You run, stupid fool!" She spoke in her own tongue.

"She is alone," Esther said, indistinctly.

"What matter if she screams a while—walk slow, I say!" Her small eyes gleamed beneath their folded lids; there was the anger in them that belongs to those who can beat a sick horse, or a suffering child. A sodden anger that is the portion of those who have themselves been beaten much and without reason.

Esther caught her breath and slowed her steps, but her head lifted with a motion that brought her chin from the shawl that covered it. The movement raised her brows, indenting lines in her forehead and widening her eyes. For the moment her face was bared from brow to throat. She was staring past the man who approached, her eyes unseeing, when his voice halted her.

"*Esther Rieloff!* God above!" and as he stared he added to himself with an indrawn breath, "I have found despair!"

Her dead stop and backward jerk of the head overbalanced the load Esther was carrying, and the mass slipped sidewise and fell about her feet. It dragged with it the shawl that was on her head and she stood uncovered, dishevelled, one instant of dumb amazement that carved the lines in her face as in stone; the next moment they quivered and broke. "Yes—ah!" It was a cry too subdued for joy, but she stumbled across the fallen garments and clung to his outstretched hands. "Mr. Pemberton," she cried, through the mist that the rush of blood brought to her eyes.

"Yes—and you?" His look swept her, the old Russian woman who stood agape, the fallen clothes, the street. His eyes came back to her face. "I see," he said. "Don't cry now, child, put the shawl around you." He took her by the arm, drawing her aside, his quick hands helping her unsteady ones to pull the shawl up over her head. "Don't cry—keep hold on yourself," he urged, in a low voice. "We'll go in a minute." He turned on the old woman. "Go on!" he commanded. "What are you standing about for?"

She shrank, but stood her ground. "She must come with the clothes, or we pay," she said, in Yiddish.

Marc Pemberton understood her gesture, but not the words. "Oh, the clothes——"

"I must take them," Esther's smothered voice said at his elbow. "I must go with her——"

He put her aside. There was both elation and excitement in his manner. "I will attend to her," he said. He gave the old woman money and pointed to the clothes. "Get some one to pick them up and carry them for you. . . . Come, Esther!" He hurried her to the corner, his hand on her arm, then stopped and pointed across the Square as he had to the policeman. "We will go over there to my apartment—we can talk there."

Esther was shaking, too dazed for thought, but the craving to be back in the room where her baby was alone was not due to any mental activity, it was simply a drawing of every fibre of her body. The angry Russian woman might reach the room before she did. If she could get back there and know the child was safe, then she could think. She could talk then to the man who had often held her in his arms when she was a child herself. She had forgotten the day when he had been lover-like; her heart had been so full of Rutledge Ericson on that day that it had seemed only natural that the whole world should tell her she was beautiful and that he, Marc Pemberton, the great artist, should smile in her eyes and tell her that he was coming all the way back from France to paint her.

"No, I must go home," she said, hurriedly.

"Home?" Pemberton questioned.

"I have been living with the old woman since I came here—and I must go back—before she does. . . . If you come with me, now, Mr. Pemberton, I shall not be so afraid—it is better than heaven to see you." She had the look of one too despairing to weep, and she clung to his side even while drawing him across the street.

He looked down at her, watching her curiously, the lines in her forehead, and her sunken cheeks; his look was keenly observant, even critical, the air of one who stores up impressions. "Of course, I am coming with you," he said, "and

I shall stay with you until you are ready to go over there with me."

He asked her no questions, but adapted his step to hers, buttoning his overcoat across his chest, eying coolly the people who passed and stared at the strange couple. The street was beginning to fill with those who must be at their places by eight o'clock, the East Side, foreign New York, hurrying to its day of labor. Pemberton began to talk easily, swinging his cane as he kept on by Esther's side.

"I often come out to look at this crowd—I don't even have to leave my room, they stream past my windows. One is tempted to ask, 'Where are the men? The working world has gone into petticoats.' Yet when the sun's warm on the pavements just go out and walk about a bit, and there are thousands more sitting around and nursing their babies, a human mill turning out more material, and still more, to be ground up and turned out again—a monotonous process."

Esther drew her shawl closer and answered nothing. He could see only her eyes, wide and gray, looking down the two blocks that separated her from the place that every nerve in her was aching to reach.

He broke off his monologue. "How far do you go, Esther?"

"A little way only, Mr. Pemberton."

"And how long have you been my near neighbor, child?"

"Since October—I went to the old woman when I first came—she was the only person I knew here. Mr. Rieloff took me once where she lived, so I knew the place."

"And the tenement called you, did it?"

"It was the only place I knew," Esther repeated.

"I did come back to paint you, Esther. Do you remember I said I would? I was man of my word. I got in on Christmas week, and two days later I rode up the Cumber. The

cottage on River Road was sealed tighter than a drum, and they told me at the station that you had flown in a night. There is an old man there who chatters. . . . Every flower in your garden was dead."

Even in her stretch of nerves, Esther marked his words. He knew then. They had told him some of her story, and he had guessed the rest. It was his way of telling her that he knew. As she drew nearer the narrow stairway beside the rag-picker's basement her terror had lessened. It was impossible for the old woman to come as rapidly as she. She had more attention for her companion, and the dread of telling the things she knew she must tell him had grown with each step. If he already knew, she was saved a great deal.

All she said now was, "The room is two flights up."

"You lead," he told her.

She went up the stairs quickly and he followed. The door on the landing was locked, and Esther dropped on her knees at the keyhole, her hands curved about it, peering in. Pemberton stood and looked down on her as she crouched. Her shawl was pulled away from her head again, and her heavy coils of hair rested on her neck. His eyes ran the length of the dirty hall. There were open doors farther along, and talking; a child cried shrilly at the end of the hall. He knew what Esther's childhood had been even better than she did herself; she had come back to her own very completely; as she knelt there she was wonderfully a part of her surroundings.

She stood up at last, leaning against the door; she looked spent now, as if some source of strength had been sapped. "She is not back," she said. "The door is locked yet and I can see she is not back. . . . Mr. Pemberton, I must wait till she comes and lets me in and if you stay she will be afraid to be angry, and—we—you can tell me what to do—you will help us. . . . I thought of it the moment I saw you."

He put his hands on her shoulders, looking directly into her eyes. "Us?" he said.

The blood that came in her face brought the mist in her eyes as it had a short time before when she had clung to him in the Square. "Mr. Pemberton, you know—why it was I must come back quickly—to this room. They told you at River Road."

"Yes, a love story," he said, lightly, "but my eyes told me more." He touched gently with his forefinger her strained eyes, and hollow cheeks, indexes of drained vitality. "Did you think I had looked into women's faces for twenty years and not learned to know the look of the girl who nurses her baby? . . . We'll not wait for the old woman, Esther. We'll all three of us get out of this quickly."

She looked down, the tears gathering under her lashes, her chin quivering. "The door is locked," she whispered.

He laughed softly. "We'll remedy that." He drew out his key chain, sorting the keys deftly. "I could pick any lock in the house—they're all made on the same plan."

Apparently he spoke truth, for under his fingers the door opened on the hoarser roar of the Elevated. Esther went as directly to the cot barricaded by two rickety chairs as if drawn by ropes, and Pemberton stood in the centre of the room watching her, one hand in his coat pocket, the other stroking his small upturned mustache. Esther bent and touched carefully the blankets that covered too closely the bit of humanity buried in them, her look anxious, brooding. Pemberton's arched brows lifted, the wrinkles grown deeper in his forehead, his gaze one of utterly absorbed interest. He still stroked his mustache, the only indication of the nervous excitement stirring in him. When Esther turned again, he said, "Well?"

Her voice was low. "She has not been awake."

She unpinned her shawl and stood with uplifted arms,

twisting up her fallen hair, her motions rapid and unconscious; she was not thinking of herself. "She must have gone on to the shop," she said, more to herself than to Pemberton. She was wearing the same dull red dress she had worn in the country. It clung to her, and her uplifted arms made still more apparent the beautiful lines of her body. The fuller development of her girlhood was gone. There was the long line from under arm to slightly curved hip, and the clean length of limb ever sought after by artists. Pemberton grew pale under the shiver that touched him; a delight that while impersonal is closely allied to love.

"Get what you want, Esther, bring her and let us go." His voice was as low as hers, but from a different cause, his easy manner subdued. . . . "Come! let us go."

She looked at him hesitating, anxious. "But where, Mr. Pemberton?"

"I have said—over to my rooms; we can talk there."

Her look of trouble deepened. "But can I bring her there, Mr. Pemberton? What is there you think I can do? I must work and care for her. If I come to your house it can be only for a little time. What do you think I could do? . . . I have nothing at all, not one penny. . . . They took everything away from me when I was ill. The old woman says I owe her much money. She will not let me go out of her door without her, and I will not leave the child alone with her. She has learned what she can do with me because of fear—I have been like one in prison." The blood flooded her, making her tremble as she talked. "Sometimes I could strike her I am so wild with anger, but it is for my baby I am afraid. I have been so *afraid*, I have been sick. I *hate* the old woman, but I am still more afraid of her——" She was blazing with passion now. It brought back to her face the vivid beauty that Pemberton had seen that morning on River Road. Esther had years of youth before her yet,

despite her strained eyes and thin cheeks. A little happiness and she would bloom again. The part of Pemberton that was man as well as artist saw it very plainly.

"Come here then and sit down," he said. "We will do our talking here."

"But she will come back," Esther objected, trembling.

"If she does I am here still. But we'll have no scenes, Esther; trust me for that. We will be off before she comes—you have seen the last of her."

She drew a quick breath, obeying him instantly. The only other chair was at the work table, and she came to it, resting her arms on the table, her eyes on his face. Her look was rapt, in the intensity of its eagerness, the green light deep in her eyes.

He was still pale. "Esther, do you remember what I said to you that morning we walked on River Road?"

She searched memory, puzzled. "I do not remember—exactly. You wished to come back and paint me—you were just laughing at me—"

"I was not. I told you I was coming back to take you away from Mr. Rieloff, and teach you how to love me, and you fenced nicely, and said you loved me almost as much as Mr. Rieloff. I told you I'd paint you and teach those clever fingers of yours, and you smiled and said I was playing I was a young man and trying to say pretty things. . . . I have never forgotten that. I was old, shrivelled for a moment. Ugh! I saw the horror that haunts me! Myself robbed of inspiration, the power to paint gone. When that time really comes I shall go out like a candle in the wind."

"I remember some things—I was not thinking then." Her brows had begun to lift, the light dying in her eyes.

"No; you were dreaming of the boy who rode up and down River Road waiting for you. . . . Every word I said then I mean now, only we will take your baby along, and you can

have anything you want for her. She will be first—I see that—it's only natural."

Esther stared up at him.

He leaned over the table, resting on his elbow. "Listen! I'll teach you how to draw and paint, how to use your fingers so you will be as free as air—if you want to be. You can make your own future then—and *hers*. What good would a few dollars be to you—a little charity? What you want for her is a *future*. Give me yourself—and a little time—that's what I ask. You can live as you please—call yourself what you like—leave all this behind you, drop it like that old shawl. You can do what you like with me, for I'd kiss your feet for the privilege of painting your face. You can't understand, child, but when I love most I can paint best. . . . And I need you! *How* I need you! I've not lifted a brush for a year! My brain's been seething with a conception, yet my hand's been sterile, impotent. You have come to lift the spell!"

There was the hush of horror in her words. "You ask me to do the thing he asked? To repeat such wrong—as I have done *her*——?"

"Ah, bah, *no!* That was the wild act of two children."

"But I loved him—I am *his*. The child is his."

He shrugged. "What are you? . . . A woman without name or place. He has turned his back on you both. As you are, you'll surely drown. I'm offering you a plank to cling to—until you get wisdom enough to go on and land safely."

"I do not understand——"

Pemberton spoke more softly. "I wonder if you'd understand if I explained? . . . Esther, I have my god—it's Art. I want to make it your god as well. You have the spark in you—the imagination of the artist. I saw that in you when you were a little thing. With your help I can rise to a height greater than any I have known. I can do some of the

things I have dreamed of, and haven't yet accomplished. With you for a model, and the warmth of you in my arms as well! The thing doesn't exist that we cannot accomplish together! I've wanted for years just what I know I've found in you. . . . And you? You've sat here for weeks, staring at a life you thought finished. You've been sick with terror when you have looked over there at a life just begun. All that suffering is merely because of ignorance. Sin is ignorance. Ignorance is the only sin there is. . . . What I offer you is this: the opportunity to build up your life—for your child's sake if *you* like—I want you to do it for your own sake. I want you to set aside the trammels of convention deliberately, as I have, not through accident—that you have done already. I don't want you to repeat that folly—bring children into the world, do a wrong to the innocent as you have said. I am willing to leave the begetting of children to the ignorant who know no better, and to those whose self-love takes the form of desiring to see themselves reproduced. Doubtless they have their place in this universal chaos we call life, but you and I who have the courage to look a little higher—we have work to do. . . . Do you understand now?"

She answered nothing, she did not stir, only her eyes moved, travelling over the room, coming back again to the cot. Wrapped in those wretched covers was her life. The four walls of that room bounded her universe: her complete ignorance of any assistance possible to the desperately poor, her consuming fear, her utter helplessness; the night of suffering that had put her baby in her arms, each succeeding day of growing despair, the realization of the inevitable. If she fell in her struggling march in the army of poverty, their feet would simply trample upon her. If in the rush they carried her child along it would only be to drop her and trample on her also. Mr. Rieloff's belief in fatality, Pemberton's sophistries, a childhood without faith, Rutledge's

brutal abandonment—they had all been with her in that room. She had listened now to Pemberton's flow of words as she had always listened, bewildered, yet impressed. His stupendous egotism, as always, drew about itself the gauzy veil of plausibility. But what he offered was vividly clear to her. He offered protection and a future to the helpless being she was unable to shield. The hunted, driven thing in her, her terror, reached out for it instantly. But the thing he demanded of her! Even her inexperience grasped his meaning. He asked that she give herself up to his will in order to further his art. Her numbed faculties refused to carry her beyond the simple fact, the preposterous thing he demanded. Her ignorance rendered her incapable of picturing the real significance of such a future.

Her eyes went to the cot and remained fixed. He saw the dazed look in them grow, and spoke even more softly. "Come, Esther, come——"

"No! . . . You cannot mean what you say?"

"I mean it—absolutely. Art is first with me, and I need you."

"And you mean—you would go, and leave us—here—with the old woman? . . . Ah, no——" At his look she had dropped to a whisper.

"Yes. . . . It's for you to choose."

She bent to him in appeal, the smile she forced to her lips nothing more than the sudden jerking of her muscles. "Ah, Mr. Pemberton, when I came to you in the Square I remembered only that you held me in your arms when I was a little girl. . . . You were kind to me, and you will be to her. Ah, you will be? She is so little and helpless. . . . I cannot help you in your art—in the terrible way you suggest—I have not the possibility in me." Her voice was soft and low, in curious contrast to her frozen smile.

The blood surged into his face, making it dusky. "I

have offered her kindness—as I see it—and you too. Have I ever been anything but kind to you? . . . Let me judge for you now, then.”

She continued to look at him, blankly, stupidly, clinging blindly to a remnant of her old childish faith in him. He was white again, lined and gray, and old, only his eyes alive. The rumbling disquiet of the city was in the room, merged at intervals in the deafening roar of the Elevated that came and went, marking the passage of time. . . . A hand swept the panels of the door, meddling then with the lock. Pemberton had locked the door; the key was still in the lock. The old woman must be back. His strained attention had heard, but Esther had not.

He drew his breath quickly, then reached and touched her arm. “Esther, do I stay—or go?”

“What you ask—I cannot do it.” She kept her eyes on him, not on the cot.

Pemberton jerked himself upright, looked down on her for a moment, shrugged, and turned to the door. Esther’s eyes followed him, moving without turn of her head, all that was quivering and tortured in her following him in mute appeal. Then the noise at the door reached her, the angry rapping of the old woman, “Open, you in there!”

Esther’s clenched hands pressed the table, half lifting her, her breath caught in a gasping cry. Pemberton heard, but he bent to unlock the door, moving without haste, giving no backward glance, lingering over each throbbing moment, straining endurance to the breaking point.

“Mr. Pemberton!” Her voice came at last, as thick as the smothered tones of the old woman outside the door, but its purport was clear.

He was back, flung across the table again, his hands on hers, his grasping eyes alight. “Yes?”

She looked into his face vacantly, her brows lifted until

the lines in her forehead were folds; it made her cheeks appear sunken, her lips unnaturally red. The uncertain muscles about her mouth parted her lips. "You will care for her? You make with me a bargain then?"

He lifted his hands to her, drawing her toward him until his lips touched her cheek. "I promise—I said she should be first. Child, you think I'm brutal because I force an opportunity on you. You will live to think differently, and thank me for it. There's nothing so silly as tragedy. I'll take you away from fear, and teach you the meaning of life."

She stared over his shoulder at the grime-marked walls, her eyes dull glazed, her words dragging. "What does it matter—what comes to me? I died a long time ago."

"Dead!" he exclaimed. "Why, child, you've only just begun to live. . . . And I! Ah, I'll paint again! *At last* I'll paint despair!"

CHAPTER X

AUTUMN gave place to winter, and winter in its turn to summer, and again to winter; a year had gone by, another, and still another passed. They had brought few changes to Robert Kyle save in a business way. Mr. Burnham had become so much of an invalid that he had withdrawn from the firm, and after deliberation Kyle had taken for his partner a man who was older than himself but whose name was written beneath his own. At thirty-three Kyle was tasting the joy of gratified ambition. Had he been of a nature to yield to elation he had sufficient reason; he stood among the foremost in his profession, handling a large and lucrative practice.

But Kyle was much too busy to give himself up to self-satisfaction. He adhered rigidly to his old policy of conservative practice, avoiding any part in politics, aiming to inspire confidence rather than admiration for brilliancy. In private life he chose to live unostentatiously; he was not identified with any one of the many social cliques of the city, but there were few prominent professional men in New York better known than Kyle; he went where and when he pleased, and was welcome when he chose to bestir himself enough to appear. He was neither a wit nor a brilliant conversationalist; on the contrary, he was rather plainly spoken, but he had the indefinable quality that makes a man liked, a capacity of adapting himself to various personalities and at the same time losing none of his own individuality. When Kyle indulged himself socially his preference was rather for the frivolous, or the unconventional; he declined to take society seriously.

Mr. Burnham he visited often, for the little man clung to Kyle. His body grew more feeble each day, he fell more frequently into childish repetition, but the indomitable spirit still looked from his brilliant eyes. He had not lost his interest in technicalities, however, and Kyle often went to him with a complicated case, not so much because his former partner's acumen was helpful, but because his doing so gave Mr. Burnham such intense pleasure.

"I am all right," Mr. Burnham would say, looking up to Kyle, who had a habit of standing with his back to the fire, his hands clasped behind him. "I'm all right," he would repeat bravely, a note that dropped to pathos on the next words, "I'm just not so strong as I'd like to be—that's it; I haven't all the strength I'd like to have," and if his wife was present she would look sadly, as did Kyle, at the huddled figure that appeared lost in its big chair.

It was on a stormy evening late in November that Kyle had come with some papers; he and Mr. Burnham spent two hours over them, then they talked for a time, Kyle standing, as usual, before the fire. Kyle lingered in enjoyment of the warmth, for November was departing in a fury of sleet and snow and he dreaded the biting wind that would greet him on the doorstep.

"Ugh!" Mr. Burnham said. "Listen to that! There are some advantages in being chair-ridden."

"Decidedly there are," Kyle replied. "I've just been thinking of climbing the stairs to the Elevated—they are a long climb viewed in the prospective."

Mr. Burnham looked up at him affectionately. "And if it were not for a sickly old man you would be sitting comfortably before your own fire."

"Oh, I don't know, sir. One's own fireside may be an unsatisfying spot. I go out in search of good company sometimes."

"I suppose that's true enough," the little man returned. "Why in the world don't you marry, Kyle?"

It was a question he had asked more than once before, and Kyle had always given him some whimsical answer. This evening he received it more gravely.

"I suppose I shall have to one of these days—it's the only solution after all."

"Why put it that way?" Mr. Burnham inquired. "I have often wondered why you haven't done it before. You know it's the one thing I don't approve of in you, preferring to live your club-bachelor life at the very age when you ought to be having two or three children about you. Look at that physique of yours—you ought to be giving it to a son. Why are you waiting until you're past your prime? Why in the world don't you marry?"

"Force of circumstances more than anything else, I think," Kyle replied, lightly. "I've gotten into the habit of not marrying. I'm not naturally disinclined to marriage—I haven't been sufficiently tempted. I even weary of Melissa. She weighs two hundred pounds now—not an ounce less—and I judge from all the signs that she is planning to install a young relation in my kitchen to save her steps. She says her sister 'jes naturally' has too many children and she must take one, so I suppose she will. She calls the eighth child 'A-h-wilda,' and she is to pay me a visit some evening and be inspected."

"You're trying to divert me," Mr. Burnham said. "Come, out with your real reason!" he commanded, though he had not the remotest idea that Kyle would give it to him.

The younger man looked at him soberly. "If you were in my place and were seriously considering the subject, where would you go for a wife—what steps would you take?"

"What a question!" Mr. Burnham exclaimed. "Fall in love with some nice girl and marry her. You haven't the

excuse that so many men have—since your uncle's death you have had an independent income—entirely aside from your good practice. Marry some nice girl and make a comfortable home for yourself—there are girls enough who would love *you*."

"I am not opposed to marriage," Kyle contended, with more than a touch of seriousness. "You say, 'Fall in love with some nice girl and, of course, marry her.' You dispose of the whole matter in a sentence. But there's where the trouble lies—it's the falling in love. I can't do it at will. There are innumerable requirements in my conception of the woman I would marry." He spoke the word with a certain deference. "There must be that in her that will take hold on every fibre in me—not just my judgment, or my passions, or my adoration. It must be everything altogether, every bit of me, and where am I going to find it, or how is it going to come to me? . . . In the nature of things, and to be normal, a man will have a certain amount of the feminine in his life. If he's decent and sensible he'll treat the necessity respectfully, and merely as a necessity—just as he treats his other appetites—but the sort of thing you dispose of so easily in your neat sentence, sir, is, as I see it, a very different matter."

Mr. Burnham looked thoughtfully at the tall man who was smiling down at him. "You've never been in love, Kyle, and I don't know if I shall envy you or not when you are."

"You look upon me as inexperienced, I see, sir, but I assure you I am not," Kyle declared, with an entire return to lightness. "I was violently in love twice before I was twenty-four—my mating instinct showed itself early. Only my poverty restrained me from being the father of a respectable family at the present moment. I have also taken a flight or two since, and come to the earth with a flop that has taught me the value of avoiding such flights when one must

take them with ill-constructed wings. I've learned so much—that is the trouble with me, sir.”

“I cling to my ‘neat sentence’ just the same, Kyle. Find some good woman and marry her—suppose it's not ‘everything altogether,’ it's far better than philosophizing and living alone, or with the sort of excuse for companionship in which most of you indulge. It's men with brains and bodies like yours who ought to marry. If you had my puny frame you might hesitate—but with you—why it's a duty!”

Kyle was grave enough now. “Possibly, sir, but when I marry it will not be from a sense of duty. I require a more urgent reason than duty—possibly you will call it a more selfish reason. I know some women who are admirable, and a great many who are entertaining, but since the early days when I was in the habit of falling in and out of love, as you phrase it, I have failed to meet the woman who appealed to me as a wife, and without that marriage would be to me a horror. To tell the truth, I have assiduously endeavored to discover such a woman, and not only among your list of ‘nice girls’—I've gone to some odd places in search of her, and always with the vague hope of finding her. When I do, I shall marry her, sir, be she Turk, Hindoo, Jew or Gentile, widow or divorcée, or one of your perfect girls.” He paused to laugh a little at Mr. Burnham's troubled look, then returned to entire gravity. “Be very certain of one thing though, sir, and set your mind at rest—the woman I marry will be a good woman. I have not lived my thirty-three years without having definitely settled that point.”

“Your conception of a good woman may differ from mine?” Mr. Burnham questioned, doubtfully. “You appear to be catholic in your tastes. I confess that I don't understand you men of a later generation.”

Kyle hesitated a moment. “No, sir, I think at bottom that our opinion of goodness in a woman is the same, if we

strip it of conventional clothing and come to naked truth. I maintain that a really good woman cannot be harmed—that the good in her will triumph whatever the circumstances, stress, or strain. It may be a far triumph, gradually evolved through experience and suffering, but triumph it will. I insist, sir, upon judging a woman with a little of the fairness I accord my own sex.”

Mr. Burnham sighed. “Theories,” he said, “just theories, and you can’t marry theories, Kyle. . . . The inevitable may come to me any day, but before it comes I’d like to see you with a son. I haven’t been given that joy myself, and some way or other a little of my affection has gotten tangled up in you——” He stopped abruptly, ashamed of the tremor in his voice.

Kyle’s look said far more than his quiet, “Thank you.” Then he added after a considerable pause, “I’m poor at words, sir, so I can’t tell you fully what your affection and confidence have been to me. From the first moment I met you, you have treated me with unvaried kindness. I think perhaps I have missed a father, as you have a son, for you know I was a little chap when he died, and I don’t remember my mother at all—my uncle took charge of me, and I had to strike out for myself pretty early. You’ve had the largest share in making me, sir, and it is my firm intention to do credit to you—even in the matter of giving you a grandson.” Kyle ended with his attractive smile.

“Nonsense!” Mr. Burnham exclaimed, but his pinched face was flushed and happy. To cover emotion he remarked, brusquely, “Do you see what time it is? You better be off and let me go to bed. Oh, listen to that wind—there is sleet in it now!”

“It’s bitter for the poor, this weather,” Kyle said. “There are two seasons of the year when I’m in a state of chronic discomfort, mentally as well as physically: one is at times

like this, and the other is when the slums camp on the sidewalk for a breath of air. I don't know which hurts me most."

Mr. Burnham moved restlessly. "When you came in, I was reading a Ghetto story, a short thing with a lot of illustrations in the last number of *Mercey's* and I didn't need the nasty wind out there to make me feel cold. This story is about the slums in January, and there was another story in the number before by the same author, the Ghetto in August. I give you my word that when I read it I moved back from the fire for I was hot. They were good writing, both of them. I am tired enough of the run of stories, I read so many of them to pass time, but those are out of the ordinary."

"We get a lot of that sort of thing now; it's the fashion. I don't read them for I know the reality too well," Kyle remarked.

"Yes, I suppose you could instruct even a newspaper man," Mr. Burnham replied, with an added shade of gravity. "It was wasted effort though, wasn't it, Kyle? Whatever do you suppose has become of her?"

Kyle knew well enough to whom Mr. Burnham referred. The old man had asked him that same question innumerable times during the last three years, and Kyle always answered it as if asked for the first time. It was in such ways that Mr. Burnham showed mental failure. The things that distressed him were subjects of frequent reiteration.

He answered patiently now. "I wish I knew, sir."

Mr. Burnham sighed, and moved again restlessly. "I should never have shown her that boy's letter—I should have managed better," and he shook his gray head, sadly.

Kyle sought to divert him. "Miss Acres tells me that the Ericsons seem to be settled permanently in Paris. She says Rutledge shows no desire ever to return. Miss Acres tells me a little, and Floyd-Kaufman more, and I gather

from it all that Rutledge Ericson is travelling about as fast as it's possible for a young man with plenty of money to travel. . . . I suppose Mrs. Ericson is as determined to live abroad as Rutledge, for she has only been back here twice in the last two years, and then only for short visits."

The blood came into Mr. Burnham's pinched face. "She better stay away altogether!" he said, sharply. "If she ever comes near me, I shall not be able to control myself—she certainly would hear an old man's opinion of her." But he went back to his subject. "Kyle, I have sometimes wondered if Mrs. Ericson was not the only one of us who knew where Esther Rieloff was, and what has become of her."

"Any supposition is possible, sir. I've had theories enough that have led nowhere."

"You searched long enough, and carefully enough, here in the city, and we know she never went back to the mountains. If she had done herself a harm we would almost certainly have discovered it. What do you think, Kyle?" It was the old man's constant question.

"I have given up theories, as you know," Kyle said, "but I have thought among other things that she may have left New York—perhaps almost immediately. I don't know that she would fare any better elsewhere, but certainly there couldn't be a worse place for here than this. It's negative consolation, that. I have a curious sort of certainty that I shall find her sooner or later; I still search about for her. I've visited some queer places when the hunting fever takes me, as it frequently does. It's remarkable how observant one becomes when there is an idea of the kind always at the back of one's head. I take in a car full of people at a glance, and there is rarely a face that passes me of which I haven't an instantaneous mental photograph. . . . I am certain she is living. The thing is, what has she become in these three years?"

"You never told me all this before," Mr. Burnham said, a little curiously.

Kyle flushed. "No, I don't suppose I thought to tell you."

"I never dreamed you were still hard at it. . . . I suppose it was Mrs. Ericson's turning her back on the girl that roused you. It's the kind of thing that would. You know, Kyle, Bland was an animal in some ways, but he would never have done that. I used to think Rutledge Ericson wilful and reckless to a degree, but I never before knew him to do a cold-blooded thing. In spite of his wild doings I liked the boy until this thing came up. It's his mother as well as his father in him, I suppose."

"It's a pity we can't elucidate a mystery and change the nature of people by talking, sir," Kyle said, and silence fell between them. The sleet-like snow drove sharply against the windows at intervals, a disagreeable reminder to Kyle. "I ought to be going," he said.

Mr. Burnham woke from reverie. "Call up a taxi, Kyle. I don't like to have you walking in this storm."

"It won't hurt me an iota," Kyle said. "On the contrary, it will do me good. I'm as bent on exercise as a prize-fighter, or a woman of thirty who is growing stout. I would be as likely to neglect a case as the gymnasium. I'm thankful I haven't begun to soften yet."

"I should think not!" Mr. Burnham exclaimed, with the air of one personally affronted. "I don't believe you have gained five pounds in that many years." He looked Kyle up and down with the pride of a woman, and promptly fell into feminine distress. "But have you a proper overcoat for this weather, Kyle? I don't like your going out in it—I don't like it at all. It's men like you that come down with pneumonia, while people with chests like mine escape."

Kyle laughed his rare laugh. "I don't need a wife as

long as I have you to fret over me, sir," he declared. "My coat's fur-lined and furnished with a collar that about reaches my hat back and front. I wish every one was as safe from the cold. I suppose I better get into it and be off."

"Be careful of the front steps," Mr. Burnham warned, anxiously. "They have been applying salt and ashes and what not, but one can't guard against such an onslaught as this."

The little man's face looked very pinched and white when he became troubled, and Kyle eyed him anxiously, as he buttoned himself into his great-coat.

"When will Mrs. Burnham take you to Florida?" he asked. "You ought to escape this weather if possible, sir."

"Oh, we'll have to go soon if this keeps up," Mr. Burnham returned, irritably. "I detest Florida—what sane, healthy man ever wants to go to Florida! A warm bath it is, and only fit for an army of wrecks—but what's the use!"

"I have never been there," Kyle said, "but I'll run down in February if you ask me." He had saved the offer until the moment of departure, for he wanted to leave the little man happy.

"Will you, Kyle!" Mr. Burnham was alive with pleasure as Kyle had known he would be.

"Try the effect of an invitation on me in February," Kyle laughed as he went out. "Good-night, sir. I shall telephone you in the morning to tell you that I reached home in safety; otherwise you'll be fretting."

"Good-night, Kyle, good-night! And mind the steps, boy, mind the steps!" Mr. Burnham called after him.

"Yes, sir," Kyle returned, as he shut the door for a time on warmth and comfort.

Mr. Burnham's caution was needed. Kyle reached the sidewalk with difficulty, then settling his hat securely on his head, braced himself against the wind, and went on. He

was just west of Central Park, with the Elevated only half a block away. The sidewalk was treacherous, and all the winds of heaven seemed to have collected in the park and from that vantage ground to have plunged whistling and shrieking down the streets. Kyle was solid and sure-footed, but he found great difficulty in standing erect. Before he had climbed to the platform of the Elevated his fingers were numb and his ears stinging, for the cold was terrific.

He took a Sixth Avenue car that was almost empty until it reached the theatre district. It was too late for the theatre crowd, but there were still some stragglers and quite a number of theatre attachés, mostly girls, who entered and filled the seats. Kyle had often before seen this sprinkling of after-folk, among whom the chorus girl of the cheaper order, or the ten-dollar-a-week girl, was unmistakable. When the car reached Thirty-fourth Street all the seats were taken, and he rose to offer his to two girls who had come in. One was tall with a mass of vivid red hair and a toque set sideways upon it, a vigorous looking girl in spite of her white cheeks. The other was not so tall, and wore a long, rather loose black coat that concealed her figure. She was so completely wrapped in a gray chiffon veil that Kyle at first glance could not distinguish her features. The taller girl was muffled in cheap fur, but the other had for protection from the cold only the voluminous veil which was twisted several times about her neck.

The tall girl gave Kyle a quick glance from her snapping brown eyes, and thanked him in the clear intonation that every stage girl practises. "You sit down," she said to her companion. "I'm not tired." The other demurred in a voice that was smothered by her veil, but the taller had her way. "Why, I get off in a minute," she said.

Kyle stood directly behind them, his hand on the back of the seat he had vacated, and could hear their conversation.

The red-haired girl appeared to be vivacious. "What vile weather!" she exclaimed. "If it wasn't for keeping on the good side of Kernack so he'd give me a chance by and by, I'd have dropped out last week and not waited to be dropped by them to-day. Kernack was pretty decent when he told me they had to cut out a lot of us when they went on the road—he's a nice little man anyway."

"Yes, I think that is true," said the other girl, in a voice made indistinct by her veil. Even so it had an inflection Kyle remembered, and he stiffened.

"*You've* reason to think so," the red-haired girl said, enviously. "They wanted to take you along badly enough."

"But since I could not go, how much better off am I than you?" the girl in the gray veil said more distinctly. Kyle changed his position so he could command her profile, and observed her steadily. She sat looking forward and he had a blurred impression of black and white beneath the veil, and a contour that had grown familiar because of recollection kept vivid.

"A good deal better if what I heard Kernack tell Meister is true?" the red-haired girl retorted. Her remark was a question, and she paused, but her companion said nothing. She continued, "I heard him say you had a pretty good chance at the Gaiety—I don't blame you for staying if that's so, but what luck." She pursed her mouth in an inaudible whistle.

"Yes," said the other in a manner almost too grave for irony, "with me everything depends on 'luck.' I may choose what I will do and what I will not. Possibly I may now choose not to remain on the stage. I am, as you say, extremely 'lucky.'" Her emphasis on the last word was not pronounced enough to be bitter.

The taller girl looked down at her curiously, then she said, "I hope you'll come to see me—you know where I live.

We've been together two months, every night but Sunday, but you haven't asked me to come and see you—I don't even know where you live."

"No," her companion answered, quietly. "What time have I but Sunday—and Sunday also I am busy. If I can I shall come to see you, but I have scarcely one little minute of time."

"Well, don't forget me—and the old Garrick. It hasn't been all fun for us in that freezing old shack, has it?" Her hand pressed the other's shoulder with a sort of rough friendliness. "Say though, here's my station—good-night."

The girl who was seated turned to look up at her companion. "No, certainly I shall not forget—many things. I hope you are not tired from standing?" The light rested on her face and the softly spoken words with their touch of accent were distinct. Chance had at last found Esther for Kyle.

He stood staring down at her.

She sat within reach of his hand; now what was he going to do? He felt excitement, and a strong sense of elation. He could not for the moment think clearly. He had searched about for three years, and here she was at his elbow—now what next? He had spent much time in considering methods of discovery, and he had never thought for five minutes of what he should say or do at the exact moment when he found her; circumstances were always so incalculable. Kyle felt certain that his face would be entirely unknown to Esther; she had been as good as blind when she ran against him in the office. He had no wish to present himself under conditions that would arouse fear or doubt, and to address her was out of the question. Kyle had wondered often enough what time had brought to Esther, what suffering, necessity, or degradation; he had a clear enough understanding of the possibilities that might befall her, and the changes that he

must expect to find in her; under no circumstances, whether her life in the meantime had been fortunate or unfortunate, could he expect to find her the same as the girl who had come to his office. Yet at the sound of her voice and the indefinable something in her bearing he was instantly taken back to his first sight of her. It might have been that very morning she had sat in his line of vision, her eyes on the floor. He must act sensibly if he intended to accomplish any of the several things he had pondered. As he looked down at her he felt that she would be difficult of approach. He did not know why he felt so certain of it; possibly it was her voice that conveyed the impression. It would be easy enough for him to follow her and learn her destination; she would not escape him again.

They had reached Fourteenth Street and Esther rose to leave the car. It was Kyle's own station, for his apartment was just off Union Square on Sixteenth. She hastened down the steps and sought the doorway of the corner store, looking westward on Fourteenth as she went, and Kyle guessed that she waited for a car going east. He waited also at a distance. A few huddled figures passed them on Sixth Avenue, and those who walked briskly paused for a glance at the girl in the doorway, but Esther turned her back on them. No living creature could dally in that wind, and they passed on. She raised her hands to her ears and clasped them, turning about and stamping her feet to keep warm, but even in the shelter of the doorway she could not endure it very long. There was still no car in sight and she came out of her corner, turning east on Fourteenth Street. She went bent over and almost running, for she was slender and light and the wind drove cruelly against her. Kyle strode after her.

Esther went on until she reached the juncture at Union Square, a long walk in that remorseless wind. There she

left Fourteenth Street and, crossing Broadway, entered the Square, taking an oblique direction that headed for Seventeenth and Fourth Avenue. She was forced to go more slowly here, for the sweep of the wind was tremendous; she struggled and staggered against it, making headway with the greatest difficulty. Kyle was only a short distance behind her, following closely. They crossed Fourth Avenue, and instead of going on to the corner of Seventeenth, Esther turned to her right and entered Sixteenth Street. She stopped at the second house from the corner, a narrow old-fashioned apartment house and, to Kyle's utter amazement, climbed the steps to the entrance and let herself in. It was the oldest building and the only dwelling-house remaining in the block. The upper stories were high enough above the building that occupied the corner of Fourth Avenue and Sixteenth Street to command a view of the Square, but the lower floors were shut in closely by business houses. The topmost floor was Kyle's apartment, his home for the last five years, and somewhere under the same roof with him Esther Rieloff had her abode! Kyle stood on the sidewalk, for the first time that evening entirely unmindful of the cold.

When he let himself in Esther was half way up the first flight of stairs, and he climbed steadily after her, for the antiquated elevator did not run after midnight. He followed her up to the fifth floor, and there she turned abruptly, disappearing into the narrow passage that led to a rear apartment. Kyle stood still then on the stairs, listening until he heard a door unlocked, then closed. She must have heard him behind her on the stairs, yet she had not turned once or even glanced in his direction; she had climbed the last two flights draggingly, and she might well have been too exhausted by her struggle with the wind to care who followed so closely.

Kyle went on to the floor above, and let himself in at his own door, his sensations still those of bewilderment.

CHAPTER XI

KYLE knew even less of his immediate neighbors than most apartment dwellers. He had spent five years in his present surroundings, and in all that time had made the acquaintance of only one inmate of the house, an artist who had occupied the apartment Esther had entered the night before. At long intervals he met some one who appeared to be coming in or going out like himself, and now and then he shared the leisurely elevator with a man or woman whose personality made no impression on him. The elevator was rarely used by any but the occupants of the two upper floors, for it was one of the slowest of its kind, run by water power and presided over by a janitor who must be exhumed from a far corner of the basement. It was an exasperation to the few friends whom Kyle made welcome in his apartment, but he himself had a fondness for it; it so strongly accentuated the difference between his working day and his hours of leisure. The entire house was as unfashionable as the elevator, but Kyle's apartment had satisfied him, for it met his requirements. It was quiet, spacious, reasonable in price, and situated midway of his office and his clubs. Kyle realized that Esther might have lived beneath him for months, even a year, and he would have remained in ignorance.

His curiosity urged him to make prompt inquiries. Early the next morning he found a pretext and sent for the janitor. From him he learned that the young woman who occupied the rear apartment on the floor below had leased it for a year, and had lived in the house for about five months. She had informed the janitor that she required a good light for her work, and seemed pleased with the ample window space. The janitor understood that she did illustrating for magazines,

and also worked for some paper, but his information on this point was indefinite. He called her Miss Bernais, and described her as tall rather than short. She was very white and thin, he declared, and must be, he thought, about twenty-five. She was certainly a lady, and lived very quietly. Kyle was cautious, inquiring about almost every one else in the house before he elicited this information which served only to puzzle him. But before he dismissed the man he inquired if the apartments below had telephones and was given Miss Bernais' number.

Kyle spent part of the morning in thinking over what he had learned; it was Sunday and he had time for it. The janitor's information seemed scarcely compatible with his own knowledge of Esther Rieloff, yet he felt positive that the girl he had followed the night before was the same girl who had come to his office; he could not be mistaken in that. He had not seen her features at all distinctly, but the voice and entire bearing were unmistakable. The helpless Esther Rieloff of his three years' search, a woman who looked twenty-five and was doing work that required training as well as talent! He had visited some of the worst hells in the city in search of her, expectant always of finding her, and she lived under his own respectable roof and illustrated magazines! But the girl he had taken for Esther had said she was on the stage, and very evidently she had only an insignificant part. She dressed very poorly and trusted herself on the streets at midnight. Kyle still felt much of the bewilderment of the night before, but he was no less eager to see the woman the janitor had described. He bestirred himself to invent an excuse, then drawing his desk-telephone toward him, he called Miss Bernais' number.

He was answered immediately. "Yes——"

Kyle had listened with senses alert, and the softly spoken monosyllable with its rising inflection carried conviction with

it. It struck him that the word was spoken huskily, as if the speaker were suddenly breathless.

"Am I speaking to Miss Bernais?"

"Yes—I am Miss Bernais——" There was still the effect of tension, as of anxiety suppressed.

"Am I correctly informed—do you do magazine illustrating?"

The change in the voice was marked, though it lost none of its characteristic accent. "Yes—did you wish something done?"

"I have a short article I want illustrated—can you tell me something about the kind of work you do?"

There was a moment's pause.

"But—certainly. Do you see the *Mercey's*? The last two numbers have stories illustrated by me. They are stories of the Ghetto. The illustrations are not full page, but they have been favorably commented on. You will see they are signed, H. Bernais. I have done some other things, and some advertising work. If you cared to see them and talk with me about your article——?"

Kyle remembered the stories Mr. Burnham had mentioned and felt a surprise which he hid. "I have the numbers you speak of here on my table and I'll examine them more carefully. At a cursory glance they struck me as being well illustrated throughout. I think I must see you, Miss Bernais, but it will have to be in the evening, for I am too busy during the day."

"Yes—perhaps then Monday evening. This is, of course, Sunday and you would rather not——?"

"To-night would be more convenient than Monday—if you can spare the time."

"This evening then, and if you will kindly come a little late, for I go out in the afternoon. May I ask your name, so I know who comes?"

Kyle gave it and had a momentary fear that Esther might connect it with Mr. Burnham's office, but she repeated it distinctly and went on to give him her house number and the floor and number of her apartment. If it was really Esther Rieloff he was to see that night—though Kyle still felt a doubt—he would have to explain that he was a resident of the same house. He preferred not to do so at that moment.

Kyle looked next at the numbers of *Mercey's* that the voice over the telephone had mentioned. The stories that had impressed Mr. Burnham were given a prominent place, and Kyle examined the illustrations carefully. The Ghetto types were there, treated with a mastery of technique that astonished Kyle. He had studied with keen interest the heterogeneous forces that were so rapidly moulding his city, and of a necessity he had gone to the slums for certain explanations. The immense formative power of New York's Ghetto, not merely its slum Ghetto, but the Ghetto in all its commercial and social ramifications, had arrested his attention, and he had considered it thoughtfully with an eye on the future. Kyle recognized at once that the artist had done her work so extremely well because she knew her material intimately. There was both sympathy and understanding in the treatment of her subjects.

Kyle had not intended to read the stories, but his attention was caught by the construction of a sentence, and after reading a paragraph he turned with some eagerness to the first page and then to the last, but the writer's name was not given. Kyle read somewhat tentatively in the beginning, then absorbedly, laying the first magazine down only to open the second. The first story was a love tragedy taken from the heart of New York's Ghetto. The atmosphere was there, unmistakable, perfect; Kyle knew it well. It was painted in a few clear words, a background done in bold relief, and the story was simply life. The author spoke so exactly the

truth, and the manner of speaking it was direct, original, dramatic; it struck Kyle that the writer skilfully avoided personal peculiarities of speech, but the hint of accent lay in every word, and enhanced the conception of an alien people come by thousands to claim their own—the entering of Israel into their land of promise. The simple beauty of the conception bore a flavor of oriental imagery that mingled curiously with twentieth century precision; there lay a fascination in it difficult to define, for it was so purely feminine in the subtlety of its appeal.

Kyle did not need a signature to tell him that it was a woman who wrote; if he had doubted for a moment, the second story would have convinced him. In this she wrote of a child of the slums, crippled by poverty, and crippled of body, an atom, a nothing, a bit of the world's refuse, but its story told by her brought a stinging pain to the eyelids, and a lift in the throat. She made of the bit of refuse a being, sweet, pathetic, compelling, touched with that humor which is close to tears. She hovered over it with the brooding tenderness of motherhood, whose language is universal. In the first story Kyle had warmed in admiration of a woman's mind, and in the second he looked into her heart. He still felt certain that in Miss H. Bernais he would find Esther Rieloff, but his imagination refused to forge for him the links that would connect the one with the other. One conviction remained with him: the same hand that drew the illustrations wrote the stories; the first revealed a degree of talent, but the second a touch of that power that is more nearly akin to genius.

CHAPTER XII

KYLE's knock was answered immediately; a light step on a bare floor, and the door opened on Esther. It was Esther Rieloff for a certainty. Even with the light behind her and her face shadowed by her hair, Kyle knew her. He was framed by the darkness of the narrow passage, the light strong on his face, but Esther's greeting was apparently without recognition.

"It is Mr. Kyle? . . . I am glad you have come."

She held the door wide for him, and Kyle asked, "I am not too early then?"

"Ah, no. . . . I have too bright a light; I will make it less. I have been working a little, and when I work at night I must have a very strong light, but it is not pleasant to sit beneath. . . .Will you sit here?"

Kyle thanked her and stood beside the chair she offered, watching her intently as she crossed the room. Her hand was stretched to the electric button on the wall, her face lifted for a moment to the searching light, and Kyle understood the janitor's description. When she stood beside him at the door the top of her head had only reached to his chin, and she appeared a small woman, but at a distance she looked tall, the result of long lines, and a head well set on a slender neck. It was her face that gave the impression of thinness, for her cheeks were slightly hollow, and her eyes darkened by violet shadows, the full-lipped scarlet mouth too vivid a contrast to her somewhat haggard effect. Her eyes glistened as the light struck them, but Kyle could not tell their color. This was a changed Esther, the roundness and texture of girlhood gone, leaving a face of shadows. With eyes lifted her expression was curiously immobile; with

lowered eyes it became remote, an effect produced by the unusual expanse of white eyelid. Kyle, who was easily surfeited by the ordinary, thought Esther's face arresting, and the janitor called it merely white and thin; a woman would have studied it with a certain aloofness, and an artist with elation.

Esther came back to Kyle and sat down on a low couch that sank still lower under her weight. A less graceful woman would have looked uncomfortable in the cramped position, but Esther sat naturally, an attitude that betrayed a lack of stays. The pillows behind her were covered with a faded red cotton that made an excellent background for her dull-colored gown, and against the dingy yellow of the wall her hair looked a dead black; black and white and gray-eyed she was, her lips alone red, yet her entire effect was vivid, alive. Kyle had noticed that she moved swiftly, but with that perfect control of every muscle that suggests the untrammelled motion of the thing of the forest. Now she sat beside him, become for the moment so absolutely still in feature and body that she appeared a true Oriental. It struck Kyle that her silence was compelling; she looked so intensely quiet, so perfectly controlled. He sat with his chair drawn close to her couch, his regard steady and observant, but she appeared entirely oblivious of his scrutiny, without a trace of self-consciousness. By the lowering of her wide, white eyelids she drew a curtain behind which she stood, a personality only to be guessed at, aloof, removed, hidden.

When she moved it was to lift a folio from the couch and place it on the arm of Kyle's chair. She had not lifted her lashes yet, but her forehead had knitted slightly. "I wish I had more samples of my work to show you, but I have not done illustrating long. Of what nature is your article?" She looked up at last, a wide look that met Kyle's close regard.

"It is only a short thing I have promised to contribute to the first number of a new magazine, *The Manhattan Illustrated Monthly*. I say a few things about suburban placarding, and I don't know if you will see a chance in it for two illustrations, but I hoped you might."

Her look grew in interest. "You wish, I suppose, to show the abuse of such advertising—the hideousness of the very general placarding?" Her hands had lifted now, helping her speech.

Kyle smiled. "As strongly as possible."

She put her elbow on her knee, resting her chin in her hand, her wide look still on his. It was an attitude that bent her almost double, tipping her head back until her heavy coils of hair rested on her shoulders, yet it was not ungraceful. Kyle wondered if there was any position she could take that would be awkward, or movement she could make that would be abrupt.

"I see. . . . Something in the nature of a cartoon," she said. "I think possibly I can help you to make your article effective, but if you bring me the article I can tell better. . . . And this new magazine—I do not know it, and I thought I knew them all—would you tell me about it?" Her eyes had dropped to the folio, the cover of which she fingered nervously. Kyle looked from the perfect quiet of her face to her restless hand; his thoughts were not with her question or his answer, and his manner was absent.

"It's a new venture in which a number of us have taken stock," he explained. "It's well conducted, and has good backing, but it's the advertising the magazine commands that promises to make it a financial success."

"Certainly—to live they must have it. . . . I hope you liked my Ghetto illustrations."

"Very much—they are very well done." Kyle's tones had a note of sincerity, and the color came in her cheeks, bringing beauty to her face.

"Thank you. It pleases me to have you think so, for as I said, I have done not much of that kind of work."

She looked up with a touch of appeal in voice and eyes, and suddenly a smile crossed her face, transforming it completely. It lifted the corners of her mouth, indented a dimple in her cheek, and shone beneath half lowered lids. For the moment she was vivid and very young. It formed no part of Kyle's recollection of her; it was an entirely new impression that he enjoyed. He had been merely observant of the remote woman he had not succeeded in explaining to himself, but Esther's smile held the qualities of a child, and Kyle responded to it instantly.

"Suppose we see what you have here," he suggested, pleasantly. "Then perhaps we can talk business."

Esther's look changed at once to gravity. She opened the folio and took out her drawings, explaining them briefly. "Most of these are advertising material—I think you must know some of them?"

"I have ridden on the car with this for the last two months," Kyle said, touching an infant soap advertisement. "I like that child. I'm no judge of good drawing, but I pointed it out to an artist one day and he praised it. 'Whoever did it ought to have a chance,' was his remark, and then he went on to tell me some queer things illustrators had done when they were making a beginning."

"Yes, when necessity drives," Esther said, briefly.

There was a moment's silence in which Kyle examined rather absently the drawings he held. He was thinking of her signature, wondering about the initial, H. "H. Bernais," he said, with a faint note of questioning.

She did not let the remark pass. "The H. is for my name, Hadassah, and the Bernais is a name of my choice. I have, Mr. Kyle, a unique privilege. I may choose for myself out of a world full of names any one I please—my own

became lost during my childhood." Her tones were as faintly ironical as his had been questioning.

"Hadassah is the same as Esther," Kyle said.

"Yes—I am Esther—to my friends," she returned, quietly. She took the drawings he held, and set them aside. "You have seen what those are," she said; "now these are some of my magazine things, and unfortunately they are few. This order was given me by *Mercey's* after they had taken the Ghetto stories, and seen my illustrations."

She drew out a design for a magazine cover, and put it into Kyle's hand. It was done in color; the front of an old-clothes shop, a strip of littered sidewalk, and in the foreground a Fifth Avenue girl in violet and green. The Spring was in her hat, her gown, and the blue of her eyes. One hand pressed to her bosom a huge bunch of violets, and the other held extended a single long-stemmed bloom. It was held too high for the reach of a group of street children who stood on tiptoe to touch it. The ragged shoe, the torn stocking, the faded dress, the grime of the street, were exact, but Esther had excelled in the life-likeness of the upturned faces. They were as true of a migrated Italy as the Ghetto types were of an American Jerusalem. The realism of the conception was enhanced by the hint of irony.

"It will be the April cover for *Mercey's Magazine*," Esther said. "It is to be called Spring." Her voice did not lose its sweetness despite her lift of lip, and Kyle studied her averted face absorbedly.

He let her show him her small collection almost without comment on his part, for his interest was not with her drawings. If she was eager or anxious that her work should please him, her manner did not show it, and it was only when she had concluded, and he took the folio from the arm of his chair and began in silence to adjust the strap, that Esther leaned back with a faint sigh. Kyle heard it and

looked up, meeting her eyes fairly. They were wide and dull, the brows lifted so much as to make apparent two deep lines that ran the width of her forehead. It gave her face a curious expression, making the cheeks and temples appear sunken. At Kyle's observant glance her mouth strove for a smile, in effect a grin. To Kyle it was intensely painful. His impression was of anxiety settled into despair, and he spoke abruptly in his wish to afford immediate relief.

"I like these things, Miss Bernais, and want you to take my article."

The light rose again in her eyes, the tense lines in her face relaxing. "I am glad—thank you, Mr. Kyle," she said, simply.

Kyle continued, hurriedly. "While I've been looking over your drawings I've been thinking that I might see our magazine people. Work as good as yours would interest them. If you like I'll speak to them."

"You are very kind—and when I know you must be so busy." She was not looking at him now, but he saw her hand open and close nervously. She had been desperately eager then to interest him in her work.

"Not at all—they will be glad to know of you," Kyle answered, with a touch of warmth. "Do you ever write stories—they want them."

Esther hesitated. "A little—sometimes—but altogether I have so much to do, and I have found that writing takes time. I do not write rapidly, though it absorbs me completely. I forget everything else when I write, and that is disastrous to one who must be a Jack of many trades." She smiled her sudden smile, and paused as if doubtful of continuing.

If she was asking for encouragement she received it in Kyle's tone of interest. "What are the trades, Miss Bernais?"

"They are several. I must every week do the fashion notes for a woman's magazine. That is my regular work, and is necessary, for I receive a salary for it; not much—they never pay much for such work—but it is a thing on which I rely. I should like to drop it, but so far my illustrating is not certain enough to count upon."

"But why do you dislike the fashion notes?" Kyle asked, smiling.

"They take so much of my time," Esther explained. "I must go to the heads of departments, millinery and things of that kind, and interview them. I have to go constantly to the stores, and I go early to avoid the crowds; I start from here at eight o'clock, usually, and I must spend so *much* time on trifles I *detest!*" There was a note of intense irritation in her voice that dropped into resignation. She shrugged. "I am only too glad to have it to do—why do I complain? All the rest of the day that I can command I give to this work,"—she touched the folio that lay between them,—“and in the evenings also I am busy, though I dare not work over my drawings then because of my eyes. . . . I do other things, however. I have copied manuscripts, for I use a typewriter, and for some time I have had a small part on—the stage. It makes a long day for me, and I am late in reaching home, but there have been reasons why I wished to do it—for a time.”

There was a certain emphasis in Esther's last remarks that was significant. It suddenly occurred to Kyle that she had been leading up to a matter she intended to have explained. Notwithstanding her obscuring veil, she had noticed him then the night before, and when he entered her room that evening had recognized him as the man who had followed her to the house, and even up to her door, and she might very well suppose that he had now employed an excuse to gain him an interview. There had been nothing definite enough

in her manner to indicate that she thought so, but Kyle was very certain this Esther was no longer the evident girl of the Ericson letters. If he was anything of a judge this was a woman of experience who was fully capable of withstanding curiosity and of guarding her own impressions. Her quaint speech and childlike unrestraint of movement and posture was simply a part of herself that would still be hers at sixty.

Kyle had employed an excuse to gain his opportunity, but in the mixture of motives that had influenced him he considered the least worthy had been curiosity, and the strongest the same sense of indignation at injustice and pity for helplessness that had urged his search during the last three years. There was no exactly truthful explanation open to him, yet he wished to be as honest as possible. He chose to take her remarks as a reference, for he could give no better reason to himself for her somewhat unnecessary explanation.

"I supposed last night when you entered the car that you came from some theatre," he said, "and I felt sorry you had to face that deadly wind. It was terrible. I wonder that you had strength left to climb our stairs. I have the apartment above this, and have to climb them often enough to know something about them."

"Yet our elevator makes one even more impatient." If she was surprised to discover a neighbor in Kyle she did not show it.

"Since Marc Pemberton had this studio," Kyle continued, "I've paid no attention to the people who have occupied it. They have been coming and going during the last four years, and I had no idea an artist had this room again until the janitor told me. It was he who told me you did illustrating, and it occurred to me that you might be able to do my article."

"I am glad the idea came to you, Mr. Kyle." Her voice was smothered by the hand she had suddenly brought to her

lips, a startled face looked over an unsteady hand. Kyle wondered for a moment what there had been in his remarks to make her so wide-eyed, but she was speaking again very clearly. "The room is one an artist would choose—the light is particularly good. I could afford only the one room and the cupboard adjoining which I use for a kitchen, but I have been comfortable—I only wanted a place in which to work." She spoke more dully, as if oppressed, her unsmiling eyes leaving his and travelling over the room. "They did not tell me who had lived here——"

It was spacious as were all the rooms in the house, but it was bare and cheerless. There was a big table covered with artist's litter, a couple of stools, and an easel. The square of carpet in the centre of the floor was inadequate, and the fireplace gaped fireless. A high screen partially hid a couch that Kyle knew must contain Esther's bed, and another enclosed somewhat the window-corner in which they sat. Esther had evidently attempted to make this corner of her room cheerful, for the couch and pillows were covered with red, and she had drawn into it the only comfortable chair the room contained. There was a white fur rug under her feet, and at her elbow a small stand that held her workbasket and some magazines. It was the feminine touch in a masculine workshop.

"It is just only a place in which to work," Esther repeated, in the same lifeless tone. Kyle wondered if he had said anything to offend her. He felt a little at a loss for conversation, but not at all ready to leave. Possibly the bareness of the room hurt her.

"It was just that in Pemberton's day," Kyle said. "Only it lacked this very attractive corner. When he worked he wanted simply light, space, and an easel—nothing more. He would have nothing to do with pretentious studios. He was here only a short time, and then took still plainer and better

lighted rooms on Washington Square. . . . He was a strange creature—almost a genius—and I never liked a thing he painted. . . . Have you seen some of his things, Miss Bernais?"

"Yes——"

"I suppose you admire them?"

"Why should you think so? In the things I have seen he chose to paint the painful. His color one must admire—except when he became extreme."

"He was mad over realism," Kyle said. "He seemed to be fascinated by the grotesque and painful. If it had not been for his technique, particularly for his mastery of color, he would not be endured."

"If he lived here—below you—you knew him well?"

"No—I doubt if any one knew Pemberton well," Kyle replied. "He had lived most of his life in Paris, and hated New York. He went back to Paris about three years ago and remained there until his death. I had an opportunity to know him better than most, for he used to ask me down here sometimes and over to his place there on Washington Square. He impressed me, though I never liked him. Yet I was shocked when I heard of his death, for the man had power, a touch of genius, undoubtedly. He was not merely an aesthete, but why debauch it as he did?" Kyle's brows came together, his shoulders lifting impatiently. "I am afraid my sympathies are not with the artistic temperament—it approaches too nearly the abnormal, and the Lord save us from that!" He spoke contemptuously, not looking at Esther, and she observed his grim aspect gravely.

"Perhaps we must forgive much to that touch of genius of which you spoke." Her voice was low, her quaint accent more pronounced than usual, and Kyle turned quickly to her, his frown gone.

"Possibly," he said, his look grown humorous. "It is the

popular excuse—I am willing to apply it to Pemberton and his like.”

“Is it generally known that he lived in this house, and that this was his studio?” Esther asked.

The question annoyed Kyle, for it struck him as shrewd. He smiled at her somewhat tentatively. “Some of the artist folk may remember—possibly—but he never exhibited here. He was here only a short time. They would all know his studio on Washington Square. . . . Why, Miss Bernais? Did you think the fact might have some advertising value?”

Esther drew a sharp breath and flushed so agonizingly that Kyle was contrite, but she gave him no opportunity to apologize. “If a poor would-be illustrator set up her easel in the well-known studio of a deceased great artist she might win some *little* attention, Mr. Kyle?” The blood was still hot in her cheeks.

It seemed to Kyle that her voice was sweetest when ironical, but he had been rebuked. He had misunderstood her question, and had no clue to the motive that prompted it; he had no clue to the meaning of Esther, herself, for that matter; she fitted none of his preconceived ideas. Time and a further observation of her might elucidate some of the questions he had been asking himself during the last half hour, but at that moment he felt somewhat helpless, and decidedly annoyed, whether with himself or with Esther he did not know.

“I suppose everything has advertising value if it is skilfully manipulated.” Kyle rose as he spoke, but Esther sat for a moment looking up at him. That his irritation had taken refuge in an access of dignity was apparent, and Esther rose very deliberately. As she stood beside him she looked young and slight, timid and a little troubled. She was no longer the Jack of many trades, or the woman who spoke sweetly and glanced about her with heavy eyes.

"But—you must go then?" she said regretfully. "I thank you very much that you came, Mr. Kyle. As yet there is so little that comes to me—I must always seek it—so to-night I am glad." Her air was appealing, the feeling in her words sincere, and she smiled unreservedly. "I am so glad, that I am even valiant—I feel capable of knocking the spots out of suburban advertising—of making it appear *fierce!*" She raised her hands in a gesture of exaggerated abhorrence, and Kyle laughed outright, for her precise utterance of the slang phrase, and the intense denunciation expressed in her "fierce," were irresistibly comic. She had suddenly smoothed away the fold from between his eyes, and he was aware that she had done so, but for some reason the childlike ruse pleased him.

"Have you a comic, a tragic, or a sentimental part at the Garrick?" he asked, the laughter in his eyes challenged by the elfish gleam in hers. She was a different being from the remote woman of a few moments before. He suddenly felt privileged to laugh softly with her. Her peculiar accent delighted him. She pronounced his name with a lingering intonation, "Mr. Ky-el;" her "no" was the foreign "non," accompanied by a little outward gesture of negation. Some of her words were only touched by accent, others were markedly mispronounced.

"If you have not seen that great production, 'The King of Canute,' Mr. Kyle, you must judge from what I tell you: For one month I wore a yellow wig, and a train, and said three words. The second month I dressed as a page and appeared in every act. I was allowed six sentences. I sat on a rock and said two, I knelt to the King and said another, and I ran across the stage in excitement and said the remaining three. I said them well, I suppose, for they wished me to go *en tour* with them."

"And you won't go?"

She shook her head; she was grave again. "Ah, no, I would not go—I wished to stay here. I have a better offer here if I wish to take it. It is for me to decide if I will decline it or go on."

"But you won't go on?" A good deal of the interest and pity that had prompted Kyle's three years' search of her showed in his look and voice, a good deal more than he suspected, and Esther lifted her lashes to it, a slight raising of the curtain behind which she had hidden herself. And Kyle was wondering why she allowed him now to question her. During his examination of her drawings she had been tense with anxiety, when he had attempted to make conversation by talking of her studio and its former occupant she was irritatingly aloof, but now she was simply appealing, apparently willing to explain herself, her attitude no longer tentative or distrustful.

"No, I shall not go on," she said, with quiet decision. "I do not wish to go on. There is no chance for a woman situated as I am. She must try and try, and wait with a sore heart, and live on nothing—the life is deadly. . . . Either that, or she must go to some one who will give her money—who will, as they say, 'back' her, 'protect' her. The necessity does not need to be discovered, it is thrust upon you." Her eyes were heavy again, her voice dull. She lifted her hands and dropped them in a gesture of finality. "No, I shall not go on."

"I'm glad to hear it," Kyle said, "and I should like to ask you why you did it in the first place?" His manner was brusque, but there was no mistaking the kindly look he gave her.

It brought the color to her cheeks. "I did it for two reasons, Mr. Kyle. I needed the fifty dollars a month it brought me, and also I have ambition. What are the things a woman can do who has much against her? You see I am

poor, and I may as well tell you that I draw the faces of slum children well because I know them so well—I myself was born in the slums. Naturally I thought of the theatre. If a woman can have her opportunity on the stage, there is no one to question—she may come from the slums—anywhere—many do. I have a little ability to act, just as I have a little ability to draw and paint. If there was a chance for me on the stage—one I could take—I wished very much to find it, so I made my trial. . . . For some time I have known the truth—there is nothing possible to me but very hard work that I cannot enjoy because I must drive myself with a tight rein, and lose not one little minute. I must be a Jack of many trades until I establish myself sufficiently in some one to work at it alone.” She had flushed scarlet and stopped, her voice grown a trifle indistinct in her embarrassment. “It is, as you see, Mr. Kyle, a great mistake to ask any question that leads me to speak of myself. I and my small concerns are of the greatest importance—to myself.”

Kyle avoided a platitude, though at that moment he would have uttered it with emphasis. “Among your many ‘trades,’ as you call them, Miss Bernais, I think I can put my finger on the one that promises you the greatest success. Any one who can write as you did in those two Ghetto stories has a future.”

Her hands came up, her eyes alight. “Ach,” she exclaimed, “you knew, then! But, Mr. Kyle, they were only just two little things I *felt*, I *knew*!”

“That’s why they are what they are—that and the power to express them,” Kyle said. “I’ll grant *you* the touch of genius if you like.”

She stood a moment, staring at him, vivid and quivering, then turned away abruptly. “A quoi bon!” she exclaimed, intensely, and far more naturally than she spoke her English. “It is always the accursed dollar!”

"That's true enough," Kyle replied, "but determination finds a way usually." His answer was stilted, an involuntary effort to cover genuine feeling. His pulse had stirred, bringing the blood into his face at the passionate intensity of her utterance. Behind her shadowy face and half veiled eyes Esther was aflame, and Kyle felt somewhat the same startled lift of the heart one experiences who peers too closely into an ash-covered fire, and suddenly receives a hot breath in his face.

But when Esther turned back to him she had closed the door on emotion. "You will then let me have your article soon——?" Her voice held only its usual rising inflection.

"As soon as it is copied," Kyle promised.

She led the way to the door, but as Kyle opened it she asked, hesitatingly, "I have thought—perhaps—if you were willing—I might copy it for you. It would certainly be a good way for me to read it thoroughly, and I have little to do now in the evenings."

"Of course," Kyle said. "That's a good idea. I'll bring it to you to-morrow night." Evidently every "accursed dollar" had its full value in Esther's financial scheme, but Kyle also carried away with him her appealing smile.

When he reached his own room, he took his usual place before the fire, and carefully considered Esther in the light of their recent interview. He had formed no theory that would account for the last three years, or rather he had formed so many while he sat beside her that the result was confusing, and his conclusions lacked conviction. Where had she found shelter during the months that followed her visit to Mr. Burnham, and had her child lived or not? What had been her history since? His questions were futile, so why waste time over problems he was unable to solve. He knew nothing whatever about it; that matter must rest for the present.

He took a more positive position when he asked himself what impression Esther had made upon him. The first and strongest was her purely feminine appeal, an attraction that was direct and immediate since it was animal, primitive. It was as much a part of Esther, and as little of her own choosing, as her scarlet mouth, or the lines of her body, and was entirely apart from her mentality.

Kyle was not surprised at her early tragedy, but he persisted in judging her by her smile and the note of absolute sincerity her voice had held when she gave him her reason for leaving the stage. She appeared to be bending every energy to earn a living, and by entirely legitimate and commendable means. The fact that she was "not without ambition" had appealed to Kyle. He had long ago passed judgment on the girl the Ericson letters had revealed. Her faults were those of ignorance and youth, a too vivid imagination, and a single occasion of uncontrolled impulse. With what degree of severity would he have looked upon a like act in a boy? What excuse would he have found for himself under the same circumstances?

The significance of Esther's prayer to Mrs. Ericson had impressed Kyle deeply. She had shouldered her unequal share of burden, and uttered not a whining note; her cry of agony had been for the innocent, the expression of a moral sense, a realization of personal responsibility that was as interesting as it was impressive. He had thought her letter so remarkable that it had remained with him a vivid remembrance. A girl who had passed through Esther's ordeal, and survived three years of experience—no matter what they had been—and still could look him honestly in the eye and assert that she only wished an opportunity to work, and that she was not without ambition, deserved his respect and what assistance he could offer. Kyle realized that he had spent twenty-four absorbed hours, his Sunday gone before he knew it.

CHAPTER XIII

DURING the next four weeks Kyle bestirred himself in Esther's behalf. He procured orders for her from two magazines, and in addition brought her some of his legal papers to copy. For the present she had more than she could do. He came frequently to her room, but always with a commission or some apparently necessary directions, which Esther received with an air as succinct and businesslike as his own.

She never thanked him unduly for the work he brought her, but when he left she always came to the door with him and smiled her good-by, "You must then go?" The question was in no way an invitation to remain; on the contrary, Kyle always felt it a pleasant dismissal; she was much too eager to return to her work. She seemed obsessed by a necessity that drove her to work, and forced her to continue even to the point of exhaustion. Kyle was amazed by her concentration and power of endurance.

For an entire week he had been out almost every night, never returning until midnight, sometimes not until long after, but when he paused for a moment, as he always did now, to look down the passage that led to Esther's room, a line of light still shone beneath her door, and he could hear the subdued click of her typewriter. At eight o'clock the next morning she would be on the street, and Kyle knew she hurried home only to sit again at her easel or the typewriter. He began to feel that in offering her an inducement to work he was condoning a crime, yet he could not resist the pleasure her briefly spoken thanks afforded him, for not all Esther's assumed indifference could hide the intense satisfaction she felt over each new commission she received.

"Why not rest to-night?" Kyle suggested one evening when he had brought her some of his office work. "There is no particular hurry for this." It was not the first time he had ventured a word of remonstrance, and Esther had received his remarks politely.

"Thank you, Mr. Kyle. It is nice that I do not need to hurry over it." She smiled, but Kyle knew that the moment the door closed on him she would go back to her typewriter. The fold between his brows was more apparent as he looked down at her.

"I feel I am accessory to murder," he said. "If I did what was right I should bring you nothing more for two weeks, and so far as my work is concerned force you to take a rest. . . . I feel like doing it."

Her eyes widened for a startled moment, then she said, softly, "Ah, Mr. Kyle, but no! See—it is only that I make a little hay while the sun is shining—I really rest a great deal." Kyle looked at her in silence, and she understood, for she added, in apology, "I am always pale, but really I am in no way ill."

"You know best," Kyle replied, without conviction, "but remember, Miss Esther, I don't need those papers for a week." His under lip lifted slightly as he turned away, and Esther was keenly observant despite her air of inattention.

She followed him to the door, but not to say her usual good-night. Instead she remarked, "I see you do not have your hat and coat to-night, so perhaps you will stay at home. Maybe you have a little few minutes in which you wish to do nothing, and can stay here? . . . If you do, then I *must* rest—it would be necessary."

Kyle had turned about at the door and looked at her. Her voice was sweet, her smile so provocative that it was with difficulty he maintained an air of sternness; he felt for the moment as if he were scolding a child.

"I should take pleasure in cheating the typewriter," he declared, "but I know perfectly well that as soon as I am gone you will go back to it and work until you have made up for lost time. I should only keep you up just that much later."

"But maybe I will make you a promise." Kyle wondered how her look could be at one moment so haggard, and in the next purely mischievous.

"And do you keep promises?" he asked.

"Ah, you have no faith whatever in me," she said, reproachfully. "Like all women I must sometimes tell little small lies, but to-night when you go I shall not work. I shall look for a longer time than usual through my skylight. . . . Will you believe then and no longer be angry?"

And Kyle laughed and followed her into the cheerful corner.

"What do you mean by 'looking through your skylight'?" he asked.

Esther laughed softly, then returned to a gravity that was tinged with the apparent desire to afford pleasure as well as to feel it herself, the instinctive attitude of the hostess. "If you will move the couch a little, so, and your chair, I will in a moment make a parlor of my room, a place that is charming. . . . Now wait only one little minute."

Kyle, much amused, did as he was bid. "Yes, and now?" he inquired. He was smiling at her air of subdued eagerness. For the first time since he had known her she looked happily flushed and girlish.

She went to the wall, her hand on the electric switch, glancing at him over her shoulder, her eyes agleam beneath her half lowered lids, and suddenly darkness swallowed her. Kyle heard her move, then came the touch and rustle of paper, and the side light sprang into life under an improvised cover, a bit of red tissue paper, twisted so closely that the

room was shaded and dim. It no longer looked bare; it was confined, and full of shadows.

She came to his side. "And now, Mr. Kyle, please look straight up," she begged. As she spoke she drew the cords that held the covering to the skylight and it rolled back, flooding the room with starlit night.

"Oh!" Kyle exclaimed in genuine delight.

The effect was curious. They appeared to be standing with their feet in darkness, on some eminence that lifted them until they were among the stars. The sensation was one of entire detachment, the noise of the city that even through brick walls was a murmur, lost in immensity. It constrained one to silence, an unconscious lowering of the voice.

Kyle looked down into Esther's face, and that innermost consciousness of his that wished the best for her found words. "I am glad you have this," he said. "It must help sometimes when things seem hard."

"I believe it was put there to make it possible for me to live," she exclaimed, with sudden intensity. "I work all day, often late at night, but then I can always for a short time draw aside the curtain and look up. Every night since I came into this room I have done it; even those nights when I came back from the theatre. Sometimes the sky is so wonderful I forget to sleep—even when I am tired. If you look long enough you are lifted up out of the four walls that surround you and are quite free of bonds, lying among the stars, just only the moon, great and still, looking at you. Then all things that in the day are terrifying become small and of little account. One may drink absinthe and for a time feel one's self a god—there are other ways in which one can forget entirely for a time, but they are not the same as this—this is so very great a peace." She had gone on gravely, steadily, her face still upturned. From the first night Kyle

had entered Esther's room, she had possessed the power to hold his interest completely.

"Yes," he replied, his look as grave as hers. "Coming close to the things that are so immense we cease to be—I know—there is an intoxication in it."

"And if you think wrongly, do wrongly, the four walls close in on you; there is no lifting up; there is no great peace—your bed is hot and you lay the covers over your head and say, 'What does it matter—am I alone to blame?'"

Kyle was silent. In her words and manner was the same suggestion of oriental imagery that had impressed him in her writing, but he was not thinking of that; he was grasping the meaning of what she was saying, applying it to Esther herself. His old sense of pity was suddenly augmented by something more nearly akin to tenderness. He turned for relief to the practical.

"I am afraid you have too much time to think. You work killingly, for you have no diversion. It's not possible to live like that very long, Miss Esther. The past is apt to appear out of proportion, and the future only a burden. You may stretch jaded nerves pretty far, but in the end there must be a break. . . . If you are fighting anxiety at the same time you are simply doomed. . . . Wouldn't it be better to unload it upon some one and then see what can be done?"

He had not intended to say what he had; the starlight in which they stood together seemed to loosen his tongue without asking leave of his judgment. He had known Esther for three years, and she had only known him for a few weeks.

"Yes?" she questioned, hesitatingly. She had dropped her chin and was looking at him.

Kyle concluded abruptly. "Ever since I have known you, you have been ridden by anxiety to the point of falling. . . . If there is anything at all I can do for you, Miss Esther, I stand ready to do it. I don't like to see you pushing endu-

rance too far." It was the sincere expression of his anxiety, as well as an unconscious assumption of the right to offer advice and assistance.

Esther neither moved nor spoke for a long moment, and then her answer was sweetly given. "You have from the beginning told me that, though not in words, Mr. Kyle, and I have taken with both hands what you have brought me. I fear that as long as you bring me work I shall seize it with the same greed. . . . I must not work so continually, I realize that, and perhaps after this you will sometimes come and make me stop, as you have to-night. As you say, I think too much. . . . Shall we not sit down here now—on our mountain top? Does it not seem so, Mr. Kyle—as if all the world were below us?" She had set aside his urgency, avoided his outstretched hand, and at the same time stroked him deftly. Kyle smiled while he flushed; he even felt slightly amused at his own earnestness.

That night he forgot to reckon time and remained for two hours. Esther lay back among the cushions of her couch, her hands clasped behind her head, her eyes now on the sky above, now on Kyle, wells of darkness that he could not read. She was wearing a simple white cotton dress that was without a collar, cut low enough to show her slender neck, her loose sleeves fallen so far back on her lifted arms as to leave her elbows bare. In the uncertain light her hair showed very black, her face white and touched with shadows. Against the dark couch the clean curves of her figure were well defined and Kyle knew now what its suggestion had always been. Its beauty depended as little on clothing as did the lines of a statue; stays would be an atrocity, drapery was simply a concession to convention, and superfluous, for her body had the beauty of the wild thing that needs no covering. . . . And this then was Esther at her leisure? Esther, elusive and charming, smiling and grave, sincere or softly laughing.

Kyle had no previous experience with which to compare her; she was so entirely the unusual.

This was the first of a number of visits from which Kyle collected a jumble of impressions that he pondered as he did anything that interested him completely. In their conversations Esther never once referred to any period or experience that was not connected with her five months' residence under the same roof with Kyle. She succeeded perfectly in avoiding personalities that might be embarrassing, or that would of necessity lead to explanations, and Kyle asked no questions. He was simply receptive, absorbed in his study of her.

His partial knowledge of her history unconsciously assisted Esther in her endeavor to keep their attention fixed on purely general subjects, for Kyle was determined she should not suspect an ulterior reason for his interest in her and her work. The sincerity of the interest was perfectly apparent, and Esther soon dropped the rôle of mere hostess, though she had sustained the part well, Kyle thought. She appeared even more natural then, revealing herself to his analytical sense as both childlike and womanwise, experienced in the meaning of life, but ignorant of social usage, and to some extent of the most ordinary conventions. Kyle judged her to be passionate to a degree, and at the same time self-controlled; if he decided that he had discovered a quality, he almost immediately found its antithesis. Mentally she deserved a far better definition than clever, and physically she was exceedingly alluring. She was so absolutely and utterly feminine, a contrariety of qualities that invited unflagging interest.

In some ways he understood her perfectly, for Mr. Rieloff's part in her early education was very apparent. There was scarcely a classical reference he could make that Esther did not grasp, and her French and German were almost perfect.

She had an intimate knowledge of foreign literature and paintings that astonished Kyle. When she slipped into French, as she frequently did under excitement, she appeared an alien, yet the very next moment she would reveal herself an American, quite as much so as any woman he knew. If asked his opinion of her parentage he would have said that on one side she might be Russian with an infusion of the oriental, and on the other any one of the many combinations that make an American of several generations standing.

Kyle was determined to ignore all that was disagreeable in his secret knowledge of Esther, but the knowledge was there, not to be denied. Occasionally it made him tentative, more frequently simply observant. He determined that it should not influence his judgment, make him hypercritical, yet there were certain indications of experience in Esther that he could not ignore. She was too evidently experienced. The cup Rutledge Ericson had put to her lips was not the only one she had drained. Kyle knew it as he knew many things he did not need to be told, though he granted at the same time that it was plainer to his eyes than it would be to others because he had previous knowledge to judge her by. Through what experience had she gained her quick intuition, her immediate appreciation of man's needs, her instant capacity to soothe and charm? Kyle wondered constantly how and where she had developed her curiously subtle understanding. Not through Mr. Rieloff's training. Esther was twenty years the senior of the girl who wrote the letter to Mrs. Ericson. But what had experience done to the real Esther, to the foundations on which character is built? What had it made her? What was she under her smiling aloofness, her provocative humor that changed so instantly into sincerity, or passionate intensity, her unrestrained postures, graceful always and a perfectly natural expression of herself? When she curled herself up on her couch, one

hand free to support her chin or help along her rapid flow of words, the other encircling a slim ankle, restraining as it were the foot that was never still, no matter how immobile her expression—at such moments Kyle did not know what to make of her. But for the purport of her words, and a certain reserve and aloofness that never left her, she might well have been a Turkish girl of the bazaars taking her leisure amidst a pile of cushions, a kitten curled up in the sun, or a little girl-child playing with her toes.

Kyle had an increasing desire to hold her in his grasp until he received an answer to his questioning; to scare away the elusive long enough to discover what lay in the heart of Esther. Had experience weakened will, disintegrated moral fibre, or strengthened it? If during those weeks of companionship she had ever consciously by look, touch, or word, invited his attention Kyle would have been quick to judge her, but under his scrutiny she had borne herself well, and without self-consciousness, her teasing smile apparently as natural an emanation as her occasionally vivid excitement, or cool decision. There was one question Kyle answered positively, and to his own satisfaction: he had found no evil in Esther. An inherent weakness there might be, but there again he went to his secret knowledge to judge her. But of deliberate evil, the shrewdness that appraises sin and inclines toward it, he found not a trace. Esther was not of Mrs. Ericson's clay, or that of others whom he had known.

It took Kyle weeks to draw his conclusions, two months of frequent companionship, of gradually more and more absorbed interest in a single personality; weeks during which Esther's welfare, Esther's past and her future, her thoughts, words, and actions became paramount. She filled his mind, held his sympathies. Kyle was an exceedingly busy man, his business day absorbed him while it lasted, but when it was over he had had only distractions that were not particu-

larly satisfying. It did not occur to him to question himself about Esther, to wonder at the time and attention he gave her; he was not thinking about himself at all, he was thinking about Esther. He had been without any very compelling interest, and she had suddenly appeared, and furnished absorbing matter for his thoughts and a growingly necessary companionship for his leisure hours. Had he not a certain claim on Esther? Did she not belong to him in a way? Had he not searched for her, thought of her, for three years?

For one thing he was sincerely thankful. Mr. Burnham was in Florida, so there was no need of his discussing Esther with his former partner and nearest friend. He winced whenever he remembered that Mr. Burnham shared with him a portion of Esther's history. On the whole his feelings were those of pleasurable excitement, marred principally by his increasing anxiety over her health. It was only too apparent that Esther was living under a stretch of nerves that was testing endurance to the limit; she was standing on untenable ground.

CHAPTER XIV

KYLE's contented enjoyment of a new found interest was somewhat unexpectedly disturbed by a changed aspect of Esther. The Monday in the middle of February on which Allen Floyd-Kaufman christened his recent addition to Millionaire's Row, proved the first day of a fortnight that became memorable to Kyle.

This house-warming of the Floyd-Kaufmans was the sort of entertainment Kyle detested, but Allen Floyd-Kaufman was one of his important clients, bequeathed him by Mr. Burnham, and Kyle knew his absence would be noted. To his occasional annoyance Floyd-Kaufman chose to look upon him as a friend, and in his business relations Kyle preferred, when possible, to be politic. The heavy-jowled, pig-eyed creature, with his blundering passion for art, his genius for finance, and his decadent tastes, had interested Kyle somewhat. He knew exactly the collection of people he would find in Floyd-Kaufman's drawing-rooms. Mrs. Ericson's set would be there in force; there would be a sprinkling of the more exclusive as well, and every artist of note in the city.

Kyle went disgracefully early, for he had promised himself an hour or two with Esther that evening. He wanted to be seen by his host, then escape as soon as possible. He found the drawing-rooms filled. Either there were a number of his own mind, or curiosity had been a compelling factor, bringing people early that they might have the whole evening in which to criticise, or admire, or ridicule, for this was still another most worthy House of Solomon added to the city's already long list.

Floyd-Kaufman greeted Kyle jestingly. "Didn't think

you'd do it," he exclaimed, in a nasal voice that his hippopotamine proportions succeeded in making thick. "I'd rather take my ease at Number Thirteen too, but if we build we must dedicate."

Number Thirteen was Floyd-Kaufman's bachelor apartment, as well known to Kyle as it was to many others. It contained the choicest as well as the most questionable of his large collection of paintings, and was equipped with a miniature stage. Floyd-Kaufman's suppers were famous. His night was always a Friday, and he never seated more or less than thirteen. He usually chose his guests well and knew how to draw the line between artistry and abandon.

"I always avoid the 'from eight to elevens and dancing,' so be duly impressed," Kyle returned, in the same manner.

"Don't I know it?—beastly contraptions!" Floyd-Kaufman ejaculated. "But, Kyle, come with us to-morrow night to see Aleksandra? I saw her dance in Paris—she's worth seeing three evenings in the week; it'll take the taste of this out of your mouth at any rate."

Kyle excused himself promptly. "Thank you, Floyd, but my evening's taken."

"Very well, but I want you on Friday night. . . . No, not the usual thing," he added, a little hastily, in forestalment of the refusal he read in Kyle's eye. "I am not giving a supper—there's nothing social about it—I'm simply planning to give a select few the sensation of the year, and I want you—well—as a critic. . . . I shan't take no," he warned, pleasantly, but Kyle detected in his manner the emphasis that Floyd-Kaufman was wont to bestow upon matters financial; a refusal would have given offence.

"Certainly I shall come—but you make poor choice of a critic," Kyle said, with the best grace possible. This was one of the occasions when Floyd-Kaufman's undoubted respect for Kyle's opinion was irritating.

"It won't be a wasted evening," Floyd-Kaufman promised, with a touch of eagerness. "I'm a little off my head about it to-night. . . . But, here, I want you to meet my wife before you rush to the front door. . . . Elaine, this is Robert Kyle. You haven't met him yet."

Kyle turned to Mrs. Floyd-Kaufman to receive a rather awkward greeting. She was blonde and fresh colored, and much younger than her husband. In spite of her carefully chosen gown she appeared ordinary and buxom.

"I hope you are going to stay for the dancing?" she asked, a little anxiously. "So many seem to be coming early."

"With so much to admire they will find it hard to leave," Kyle returned. "I don't dance, but I hope to see the ball-room as well as the rest of the house. It is a marvellous place, Mrs. Floyd-Kaufman, but what are you going to do with all this space?" He turned to look down the vista of pale-tinted drawing-rooms that had the sombre library as a background. "You have managed to be magnificent and at the same time artistic," and Kyle's praise was deserved, for Floyd-Kaufman had escaped the mistakes often made by his people: he had avoided mere display.

"The house was Floyd's idea, he and the two French architects planned it," Mrs. Floyd-Kaufman explained, "but I like our place on the Hudson better. It's nicer for the children, because they can be out of doors. . . . But here come a lot more people," she added, nervously, and Kyle turned away, thinking of what Floyd-Kaufman had once said to him of his marriage. "When I made up my mind to marry I went to the little town where my father settled when he first came over to this country, and there I got me a wife. No chance for hidden pasts in that place—she knew my beginnings, and I knew her ancestry. I chose the healthiest and most common-sense girl I knew, for I was looking for

an heir. The foreign method's the best—choose your wife as you would your brood mare, and get your companionship, if you need it, elsewhere. Marriage has nothing to do with sentiment—it's simply the best arrangement we know for the propagation of the race." It was the antithesis of Kyle's conception of marriage.

He pondered it as he made his way toward the library. He wanted to see the conservatory which he knew was beyond the library. Kyle was acquainted with the general plan of the house, as who was not who read the daily papers. The music-room, Kyle knew, lay between the library and the dining-room, the ball-room and billiard-rooms occupying the top floor. After a glance into the conservatory he could escape by a detour through the music-room, a manoeuvre that would free him of the receiving party in the drawing-rooms. Kyle stopped a moment to admire the library, for it was dark-toned and inviting, its perfect arrangement of direct and indirect illumination a study in ingenuity, but Floyd-Kaufman's collection of books was, as Kyle knew it would be, an all-comprising jumble.

At the entrance to the conservatory were a group of people among whom was Margaret Acres. She nodded to him over her shoulder. "Better come with us," she said, but Kyle smiled and shook his head. As he drew back to let them pass, his elbow struck some one who stood close behind him, and, turning hastily to apologize, he faced Mrs. Ericson.

"Robert," she said, with an accentuated lisp, "how do you do?"

Kyle shook hands, his face so set that it was expressionless. "I am well—as you observe."

"I haven't seen you—for three years isn't it? I've been abroad so much I have forgotten New York." Judging from her manner they might have parted in the friendliest fashion only the day before.

"Are you going to stop, or be off again?" Kyle inquired, perfunctorily.

She shrugged. "Dear me—I don't know! It depends on Rutledge mostly."

"He also is back then?" Kyle's eye was cold.

"No—there is no getting Rutledge away from Paris, but he is an uncertain quantity, as you know, and I may have to go to him at any time. . . . I am on my way upstairs—are you? It's getting too crowded here." She had bent slightly and caught up the train of her clinging, silver-sequined gown, holding it with a twist that revealed every line of her body from hip to ankle, a fish-skin effect that was truly French and expressive. She held her dainty head high, her eyes challenging. In that light her skilful make-up was scarcely apparent. She looked slender, almost young.

Kyle glanced her up and down without a smile, then met her eyes fairly. "Thank you; I'm bound for the front door by any route that will not necessitate a farewell to my host. I came in not ten minutes ago."

"And not see the ball-room?" Her smile was mocking.

Kyle wondered how long she had been at his elbow.

"I think not," he said. "I intended to look into the conservatory and then go around by the music-room. Have you seen it?"

"You mean the conservatory? No."

"Let us go in then and look at the orchids with the rest."

She smiled slightly, her crooked smile, but made no objection. That Kyle wished urgently to be rid of her she knew quite well, but she also knew she could count upon a courtesy that rarely failed him. He wanted above all things to avoid private conversation with her, and any possible scene.

Mrs. Ericson ran her eye over the conservatory, then led the way. "I was coming with them to see the orchids when I met you. Margaret says they are wonderful, and there is no one who knows more about it than she, for she has had as much to do with the planning of this house as Floyd himself. . . . Let us go this way; the palms are so close there they'll tear my gown." As she spoke she made a circuit around a group of tropical plants and they were effectually screened from view. Even before she turned and faced him, Kyle knew he had been trapped. She grew a little pale under his look, but it did not alter her determined aspect.

She spoke hurriedly. "I want a word before we reach those people, Robert, and this is my only opportunity. I haven't written or tried to see you in these years, though I could have killed myself for what I said that last night. Robert, forgive me; I was beside myself—I was simply insane." Kyle made no motion to speak, but she raised her hand as if to stop him. "You needn't say anything—I don't want you to. If you want to show you *can* forgive, come occasionally to see me. I am not urging—you will do as you like, but if you think a little you will see that it is *far better* for us to be friends than enemies. I would prefer to be friends."

She had brought the blood to Kyle's face at last. "Thank you, for both your offer and your warning," he said, a little indistinctly. "Shall we go on now to the others?"

She acquiesced at once. "Certainly—but you needn't go with me unless you wish, Robert." Her voice was as even as his.

"I came intending to see the orchids and I think I shall see them," he replied, in the same tone.

Mrs. Ericson turned without a word and led the way.

Margaret Acres received them with a languid glance at

Kyle's flushed face. "I'm glad you changed your mind," she said. "We were afraid you two had cut us and fled to the ball-room," and she introduced Kyle to the rest of the group.

It was really a fine collection of orchids, and Kyle kept close to Margaret Acres' side while she talked of them, detaining her when the rest had moved on. She appeared to know the botanical name and habitat of each, touching the delicate blooms lightly, as if conscious that her cool fingers could do them no harm. She was wearing a pale green gown that made her hair as fair as corn silk, and Kyle thought she might well be likened to the yellow, butterfly-winged variety that clung to a bit of moist bark. She told Kyle that its home was in the jungles of the Amazon, and that it was her favorite.

"It should be," Kyle said. "The yellow in its wings is like your hair, and the green on its breast the color of your gown." The flush had left his face; he was himself again.

Kyle liked Margaret Acres for a certain restful quality that soothed him. She was cool, unemotional, clever. She had attracted him enough to lead him to see something of her during the last three years, but not sufficiently for him to resent her friendship with Floyd-Kaufman. Kyle had wondered somewhat vaguely why she did not marry, and how she could endure her elephantine admirer and the necessary comment their intimacy caused. But he had dismissed it at that; she appeared to be Mrs. Floyd-Kaufman's friend as well, it was not his affair, and affected him in no way whatever. On the occasions when he entertained he always included her among his guests, and at intervals spent a mildly enjoyable evening with her. In her languid, semi-sarcastic way she gave him the gossip of her set, to which Kyle listened attentively when it included news of Rutledge Ericson and his mother. He had always had in the background of his

mind the possibility of finding Esther, and in such a contingency the more he knew of the Ericsons' movements the better. Margaret Acres may have suspected an interest in Mrs. Ericson—she had certainly heard comments on their old-time friendship—but however that might be, she was never hesitant in giving information.

Kyle had had time to consider Mrs. Ericson's recent move, and wanted a few moments alone with Margaret Acres. He detained her purposely, finally persuading her to sit down with him, while the others went on. The smile Mrs. Ericson bestowed on them as she left the conservatory may have had its share in Margaret Acres' compliance, for Kyle had long ago discerned how bitterly the two women hated each other. Her eyes followed the elder woman's glittering figure, then she looked at Kyle with her slow smile.

"On the rampage!" she said coolly. "She has taken us all by surprise."

Kyle felt she was in a responsive mood. "I was surprised," he confessed. "I had no idea Mrs. Ericson was in the city."

"Yes, I judged so. I saw your face when you met her."

"When did she return?"

"Two days ago, and she is going to stay for she has opened the house. When she has come for a month or two she always goes to a hotel." Her voice did not express satisfaction.

"I asked Mrs. Ericson if Rutledge was here, but she said, 'No.' Do you think he intends to come?"

"I think not," Margaret Acres said, thoughtfully. "You know, Mr. Kyle, Rutledge is in a bad way. You don't like him, lots of people don't, even our set thinks him pretty awful, but I'm sorry for Rutledge—I am sorry for every one of us that's wrongly born and reared, and hampered by circumstances." Kyle had never heard this note from Margaret

Acres. She sat looking down at her clasped hands, and he watched her rather curiously. "I think for one thing Rutledge is wretchedly ill, mentally, perhaps, more than physically. . . . I've been in Paris several times since he went abroad to stay, and each year it's been a little worse. Now it's much worse. He has been going the pace terribly, as you know, and he drinks, not all the time as his father did, but by fits and starts. Sometimes it's a week, sometimes it's a month or more in which he is not really sober for a minute. And the other things! He is killing himself as fast as he can, and his mother quietly looking on. Ugh!" She grew even more pallid.

"And she doesn't interfere?"

"Interfere! . . . Have you seen a spider watch a fly!" There was a glint of fire in her pale eyes.

"Impossible!" Kyle exclaimed.

"Impossible? Not at all. Rutledge might have married more than once, but she has steered him away from every decent woman he has known, and kept him out of the final clutches of every bad one. At first, after his father's death, she didn't know just what course to take except to countenance every recklessness, and laugh him out of every serious intention he ever had to make something of himself, in hopes that he might break his neck, I suppose; but of late years it has been clear sailing for her. She only has to wait and watch him; her time will come." Her hands came together tightly in her lap, a faint shiver shaking her. Kyle had no words, so was silent. "You think I am telling you this because I hate her," she continued, "but it's not that. It's because I think you understand her to some extent."

Kyle paid no attention to her concluding remark. "What reason have you for judging her?" he demanded. "I'm lawyer enough to want proof."

"Because I've watched her since I was so high." She

held her hand a yard from the floor. "Rutledge and I used to play together before father committed the unpardonable sin of losing his money. We were well worth cultivating then, so we were cultivated by Mrs. Ericson." She had returned to her usual languid manner. "As long as Bland Ericson lived, Rutledge's physical welfare was looked after as closely as if he were a prize pony—it was the one hold she had on Bland, and the only hope she had of his leaving her a cent. He would have freed himself from her years before if it had not been that Rutledge was her son. She watched Bland kill himself just as she's watching Rutledge, but he departed with a sort of grimace at her after all, for he left her a penny to look at, and everything else he possessed to Rutledge. Then she began stalking Rutledge, just quietly, persistently, in her usual way, and it looks as if she may be rewarded."

"Haven't you let an idea grow and take possession of you?" Kyle remarked.

"Whatever else I am, I am not a fool," she said, with unusual brevity.

"What do you mean when you say Bland Ericson left his wife a penny to look at?" Kyle inquired, after a moment's pause.

"He left her thirty thousand dollars, and everything else to Rutledge."

"No!" Kyle exclaimed, genuinely surprised. "I didn't know that! It was an ugly thing to do."

"There are very few who do know it. It was Rutledge himself who told me, and he wasn't exactly himself at the time. . . . Bland probably had his reasons, at any rate Mrs. Ericson appeared to take it very calmly, and told Rutledge that it made not the slightest difference to her, for she knew quite well he would see she was provided for. Anyone but Rutledge would have smiled over that, for if there is one

thing for which Maud Ericson would sell her soul twice over it is money. It's not just a passion, it's a monomania. She hides it as carefully as she would a crime. You have known her six years, and possibly have an inkling of it, but I have known her for sixteen, and I am telling the truth. She likes power, and she has ways of amusing herself, but the other comes first—*always*. It's the answer to her riddle, the key to her skeleton closet. In spite of Rutledge's loyalty to her, for he has loyalty of a kind, he has a sneaking distrust of her in the bottom of his heart, for she has never inveigled a penny of the principal from him. He allows her a good income and never questions how she uses it." She rose as she spoke, smiling a little. "I have been talking treason," she said, "but I'm given to drawing conclusions; I really can't help it. Mrs. Ericson is Rutledge's heir by will as well as in law, I believe."

Kyle rose also. "I suppose so," he said.

"Unless he should do some such wild thing as to marry and make our Maud a grandmother," she remarked lightly, but Kyle saw her lips twitch as she added, "Poor Rut!"

Kyle touched her arm and she looked up at him. "Why have you told me all this, Miss Acres?" he asked.

The tears suddenly rose in her eyes, and she caught her lip between her teeth. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose because it's blue Monday and I had a queer letter from Rutledge to-day—he writes to me about once a year. . . . He says he is about ready to 'go on his last spree.' Perhaps she thought it was safe to leave him now——"

"Nonsense," Kyle said, kindly. "It would have been nearer the truth if he had said he was sobering up in order to enjoy an unlimited number of them. He was in the lachrymose stage, Miss Acres; the least dangerous of all. People who talk that kind of rot are perfectly safe." Kyle had never given Margaret Acres credit for much heart, least

of all for a sentimental attachment to Rutledge Ericson, and he was considerably surprised. However, he had long since had reason to agree with the wise man who said that "everything in woman is riddle."

"Rutledge was a good friend of mine when we were both fifteen," Margaret Acres explained in extenuation. "When we went to smash, and mother and I were trying to sit on the pieces, he used to come around and tell me that when he was grown up and had a million I should have half of it to buy another house with. . . . It was very comforting at the time." She had returned to her usual drawl.

"Doubtless," Kyle said, a little dryly. "Promises often are."

She smiled. "You don't like him, Mr. Kyle, but there are worse people in the world than Rutledge."

"I am not enamoured of any one by the name of Ericson," Kyle returned, lightly.

"You won't be going upstairs then, or be persuaded to make one of Floyd's party to see Aleksandra to-morrow night?" she remarked, with a touch of malice. "The party to-morrow is for Maud."

Kyle smiled at her. "No; and I am not going to risk seeing our mutual friend, Floyd, again, either, so I shall escape by the music-room."

As Kyle's taxicab bore him down Fifth Avenue, he reviewed the events of the evening, trying to find a satisfactory reason for Mrs. Ericson's return, and more especially for her unexpected attitude. His first thought when he looked into her face had been a fear for Esther, the next a certainty that Mrs. Ericson had long ago lost sight of the girl her son had wronged. Her qualified threat had followed, and angered him terribly, for he had connected it at once with her furious insult on the last occasion he had seen her. After a few moments' consideration he had dismissed

the idea; there was no possible way in which she could know of his recent acquaintance with Esther except through Esther herself. She might by some chance have discovered that they were living under the same roof, but Kyle thought even that supposition highly improbable. It was ridiculous to suppose that her sudden return had anything to do with Esther's affairs. Kyle concluded that Mrs. Ericson had come to New York for a lengthened stay. She had intended to tell him that they were liable to meet at any time, just as they had met that evening, and a show of friendship would be less embarrassing than open hostility.

Margaret Acres' arraignment of Mrs. Ericson struck Kyle as founded on truth, for it dove-tailed with much he himself knew of Bland Ericson's widow. He understood now why Mr. Burnham had been impressed by the amount Mrs. Ericson had turned over to Mrs. Rieloff; she had given a third of her inheritance to the woman. Kyle thought Margaret Acres was probably right in her judgment of Mrs. Ericson, but her endeavor to palliate Rutledge's shortcomings had fallen on unfriendly soil. Ever since Kyle had known of his conduct to Esther he had despised Rutledge Ericson, but in the last few weeks of his own acquaintance with her his contempt had been augmented by a steadily increasing anger, such as one may feel at a personal affront. Kyle had listened with considerable inward impatience to some of Margaret Acres' remarks that evening. It made little difference to him how soon Rutledge Ericson followed his father; the world might be a slightly better place without him.

Kyle was much more concerned just now by the lateness of the hour; it was after ten o'clock. He had gone early to the Floyd-Kaufmans', intending to spend the remainder of the evening with Esther, for he had seen her only twice during the last week, and on both occasions she had appeared

unusually silent, too tired to talk, Kyle thought. He had grown to hate that grinding work of hers, and had pondered every possible means of relief. There were several, but he could not offer them to Esther. He had learned that she was rigid in her determination to accept nothing for which she did not give an equivalent in work. It was too late to go to her room now, and Kyle felt that his day was spoiled. He had had something of a struggle with himself these last weeks, the constant wish to leave his own fireside and sit with her in her bare room contending with his fear that Esther might feel constrained to welcome him when in reality she would prefer to be alone. So often she appeared absent, her thoughts evidently elsewhere. Kyle thought he knew whose welfare she pondered, and for whom she toiled so unremittingly; he was certain she earned enough for her own needs; her anxiety must be for another than herself.

He had almost reached the fifth floor when a woman came out of the passage leading to Esther's room, and started down the stairs. She drew aside as Kyle approached, but he passed her closely. She was unveiled, a tall woman wearing a soiled white hat; about her neck was a white feather boa, also soiled, and her coarse hands were without gloves. There was rouge on her cheeks and lips, her black-rimmed eyes set in wrinkles, a bedraggled woman of the street, with a shifting glance and trembling hands. So much Kyle saw as he passed, and his brows came together. What possible business could she have in that house? The woman shrank under his look, and hurried on down the stairs, not even stopping on the next floor to look up.

Kyle stood somewhat uncertainly on the landing above, then went on a step or two, and looked down the passage to Esther's door; it was partly open as if held by some one who listened, but did not wish to be seen. He caught a glimpse of Esther's figure, before it drew out of sight, and the door closed.

Kyle did not go on to his apartment. He remained where he was, his brows drawn, his look alert. What possible errand could a woman like that have with Esther? The sight of Mrs. Ericson had roused in him all the eagerness that had urged his determined championship of Esther. Was the villanous looking woman who had just passed him some legacy of the wretched period when the girl had been helpless and homeless? That woman was at Esther's door for no good purpose, and his combativeness was instantly in arms. He was swept by a return of the anger that had turned him cold and then hot when he had faced Mrs. Ericson earlier in the evening. Esther was under his guardianship now, though no one knew it but himself. It was the consciousness of protection that had been growing in him during the last weeks; he was ready to meet any one who sought to molest her.

Kyle acted on sudden impulse when he went quickly down the passage and rapped on Esther's door.

CHAPTER XV

"Miss ESTHER," Kyle said, loud enough to be heard by any one who stood near the door, "it is I, Robert Kyle." He had rapped and heard no sound in the room.

As he guessed, Esther must have been close to the door, for it was unlocked and opened suddenly. She stood without speaking, her face somewhat in shadow.

Kyle did not offer to enter, but explained briefly. "I was on my way upstairs, Miss Esther, and saw that woman. Your door was open and I was afraid she had been here annoying you. She ought not to be allowed the house."

Esther drew back, holding the door open for him. "Yes—I see. . . . How very kind of you—thank you, Mr. Kyle." Her voice was frigid. It stopped Kyle on a forward step, and he studied her face, startled, uncomprehending for the moment.

"Will you come in?" she asked, even more coldly. "The hall is not a pleasant place in which to stand about." It was her sweetness of accent that made the words cutting. Kyle received them like a dash of cold water in the face.

"Thank you—no—I am on my way up. . . . I am sorry I disturbed you." The blood in his face had turned it dark.

"Not at all. It is always pleasant for me to know that I am watched over—it is soothing at all times to a woman." She had drawn back far enough for the light to fall on her face, and Kyle's flushed glance told him that she was for the moment quite beside herself with anger, hurt feeling, or some other emotion that was on the point of overpowering

her. Her eyes were blazing, her lip lifted until he saw her white teeth, the spots of color in her cheeks like flame. She was shaking from head to foot, her voice the only controlled thing about her.

But Kyle was too angry now for amazement. "You misunderstand me—I am unfortunate," he said, "so I will say good-night." His backward step and slight bow were as coldly courteous as his words. He had turned quickly, but before he was out of the passage Esther's door closed decidedly behind him.

Kyle went on to his rooms, and from habit removed his coat, got into his smoking jacket, and lighted his pipe. He was white still with an anger that was all the more profound because it was edged by hurt feeling. He had been hurt in a manner hardest to forgive, an impulse of kindness entirely misunderstood. He was well repaid for meddling in affairs that were none of his concern. From the beginning they had been none of his concern, yet he had persisted. He had the reward that belongs to those who champion Quixotic causes, and with true irony punishment had been dealt him by the hand he had sought to strengthen.

Kyle's anger held until he began to question why he had been so received. Was the woman connected with Esther in some way that made his remarks appear an insult? Possibly he had not been able to conceal from Esther his secret interest in all that concerned her, and his unconsidered act had appeared an impertinence. It might well appear so. He must remember that she knew nothing of his real motives. He had never shown her anything but kindness and consideration, but would not a woman who had lived through Esther's experience and still maintained her self-respect be justified in regarding with distrust the attitude of any man who approached her? Kyle had become judicial, but his hurt still remained. Esther should have read him better in

those two months of companionship. There rose unbidden the query, What would she do now that she had driven his assistance away? Go back to the theatre? To work all day and half the night as well, until health failed and temptation became urgent? Twenty minutes before he had been cold with anger, and now he was alive with anxiety on her account. It was useless to attempt to dislodge a responsibility that he had harbored for three years; since he had known Esther it had grown into a possession. He could not rid himself of it.

He frowned and smoked determinedly, too much absorbed to hear the uncertain fingers at his door. He roused only when the knocking was repeated, and went to the door, pipe in mouth; Melissa had locked herself out as usual, of course, and as usual she knocked for entrance. Kyle opened the door on Esther, and succeeded in recovering his pipe before it fell.

"May I speak with you for a little few minutes, Mr. Kyle?" she asked softly. She was white-cheeked and heavy-lidded from weeping, but her manner was not without decision.

"Yes—certainly," Kyle ejaculated, holding the door wide, but too much amazed to ask her to enter.

She looked even more troubled, and came in hesitatingly, standing just within the threshold. Kyle closed his door, for he was in the habit of keeping it shut, and thrust his pipe into the pocket of his jacket because it was usually there when not lighted; both acts were entirely mechanical. Esther had not moved her eyes from his rather expressionless face.

"I have only come for one little minute, Mr. Kyle, that I might ask your pardon. How I could speak so to you I do not know."

"Oh, never mind about that!" Kyle exclaimed, awkwardly. He was red now.

"But indeed, Mr. Kyle, I do mind, and I could not bear it any longer—I could not let the night go by. . . . I think for one long time I have been too nervous, too anxious. Yesterday I was too ill to work, and last night I did not sleep. I sat on my couch under the skylight—sometimes it was clear, but sometimes it was blank, for it rained. I think I forgot to go to bed. This morning I still sat there. Then I must go out in the wet—I was out in it most of the day—and to be on the street in distress is *hideous!*" Her gesturing hands helped her speech. "It was long after dark when I returned, and almost immediately that woman came. She came for money, Mr. Kyle. I knew her when she did not live as she does now. I *detest* her. I gave her money—I sent her away from my door. . . . Then I saw you in the hall. It seemed to me that you came and called to me as if you had the right, and then spoke imperiously. It hurt me—it only hurt me because I was still trembling with anger and a fright that colored everything. I am so often so, Mr. Kyle." She had dropped to pleading. "It is always impulse rather than judgment with me—I had at that moment no judgment—to speak so to my only friend."

Kyle's answer was positive. "I shall never think of it again, except to feel that I was awkward and thoughtless. The only idea I had in my head was to help you. It's the strongest wish I have, I think . . . but I am forgetting. Come and sit down, Esther, and let us talk a little."

Her refusal was gentle, but decided. "I cannot, Mr. Kyle. It is very late. I only wished to ask your pardon, and come away quickly."

"Yes, to another sleepless night. Is there nothing at all I can do to relieve you, Esther?"

She shook her head. "To-night I shall sleep, for I am so very tired. . . . It is this way with me, Mr. Kyle. As I live, I spend every penny that I earn, so when I am ill I am

terribly anxious, and if anything happens to worry me, some sudden demand, I am not myself." She lifted a hand to stop him. "Ach, yes, Mr. Kyle, the first thing you in your kindness say to me is, 'then let me help you'; you said it to me the other evening. But I cannot take a gift—neither can I receive a loan—to be in debt is unbearable—and a loan to me would be nothing more than a gift. . . . I have considered a long time, and last night I decided what it was I must do. . . . I have had a terrible day, and now at the end of it my self-control is in very little pieces."

"I wish you would come to the fire," Kyle begged. "You are not fit to stand. I'll take you down in a few minutes. Stay a little and tell me if you like my rooms." Kyle wanted time in which to persuade, to ask her what it was she had done, why she had spent a day of such anxiety; he wanted to put her at her ease. He realized that she was tense still with the effort that had brought her up to him; notwithstanding her collected speech, she was shaking.

Esther looked about her for the first time since she had entered his room. So far she had been entirely unconscious of her surroundings, her eyes fixed only on Kyle, but her expression softened now into a look of pleasure. During his long lease Kyle had done as he liked with his apartment. He had thrown two rooms into one, making a spacious place; it was living room and library together, lined with bookshelves, and finished in dark wood. The chairs and couches were immense and cushioned with leather, the rugs rich in color. The room was lighted by two stand lamps of curious design, and the hidden lights above the cornice glowed warmly, in effect a rosy skylight. Esther's eyes travelled over the room, from ceiling to floor, from Kyle's large desk table at one end of the room to the ample fireplace at the other.

"I knew it would be so," she said, softly. She looked

up at him then. "And you have once or twice told me you were 'sick' of this place?" Her questioning look was wistful.

"I am alone in it," was Kyle's answer. "Let me show you the books, Esther."

Kyle knew what pleased her best in the room. He busied himself in pushing aside the heavy chairs so she might see the book-shelves, and she came presently, as he hoped she would. She ran her hand lightly over the backs of the books, then knelt to examine the lower shelves, repeating the titles and the names of the authors to herself. Her strained look was gone; she appeared interested, absorbed, unmindful even of him. He stood and watched her in silence, her white hand and arm against the background of books, her flexible body with its easy turn of waist and curve of hip, her thick eyelashes, black against her cheek. Kyle was still warm with pleasure and surprise; he had an unaccountably strong sense of pleasure, amounting to delight. She was there and the room seemed an entirely different place; it would be empty when she was gone. The next moment he realized that it was midnight, and they were alone together in his room. A flurry of sleet cut across the windows, making the warmly lighted place tempting, luxurious, and quite suddenly he wanted the touch of her. It came without apparent reason, a craving that crept to his very finger tips, a lift of the heart and an upward sweep of blood that set the pulse in his throat beating as in fever. He had realized fully what would be Esther's appeal to another; he had realized it with extraordinary clearness, an entirely impersonal recognition of the obvious, and suddenly the fever was within him.

Kyle stood quite still, and presently the portion of his brain that was rarely anything but cool, took him to task. In those last weeks he had been blindly courting disaster, and to-night he had definitely won it. Kyle knew himself

too well to doubt the meaning and the possibilities of the emotion that shook him.

Esther had drawn a book from a lower shelf, and turned to look up at him. "May I take it where I can see better," she asked.

"Bring it to the fire," Kyle said. He wondered that she did not notice the change in his voice. To himself it sounded harsh.

She went to the couch by the fire, holding the book in her two hands, carefully, as a child might, trying to sit with it on her knee. But the couch had been planned for a man's comfort, and was high and deep; to sit on the edge of it was to slip off; to sit further back lifted a woman's feet from the floor. Esther sighed impatiently, a moment of discomfort, then drew herself up, her feet gathered under her. It was her position when most at ease; had she been talking, one hand would have encircled her ankle, but both hands were occupied with the book. She was entirely at her ease, unconscious of her surroundings; as was usual with her, completely wrapped in the interest of the moment.

Kyle had followed her, and stood looking down on her bent head. He saw vaguely what it was she held, but his absorbed interest was with other things, the downward sweep of her lashes, her warm mouth, the coils of loosened hair on her neck. What a mass of it there was, and how dead a black. When it was unbound it must cover her. For the first time he was conscious of a purely personal perception of her. He wanted to search her wide look, and hear her say, "Ach, Mr. Ky-el." He wanted to sit down beside her simply to feel her nearness, touch her hand, her dress, anything that belonged to her. He stood rigidly upright, a little stiff under surprise.

She looked up at him finally. "This book, Mr. Kyle, it is *Ivanhoe*. It is the first love story I have ever read. I

read it when I must spell the words, some of them, to myself. I always loved her—Rebecca—and Ivanhoe loved best the snow-woman." Her eyelids lowered a little as if she prepared to withdraw into her own consciousness. "I think, maybe, though, sometimes when he was a little frozen he thought of—Rebecca."

Kyle was incapable of speech.

Esther sighed, uncoiled herself, and rose. "I thank you that you showed it to me, Mr. Kyle, and now I say good-night."

"Let me put the book back," Kyle said. He took it from her hands and went with it to the book-shelves. He did it to give himself time. What was it he had wanted to say? Why had he asked her to stay? . . . He remembered. He had intended to urge a gift on her, money enough to allow her to go on with her work and yet not overdo. She might call it a loan, anything she pleased, provided it would serve to relieve her mind. He had known there would be difficulty in persuading her, he had intended to try, but at this moment he was incapable of speech; if he said anything he would say too much. The first thing required of him was self-control. He would be more sure of himself another day.

When he came back Esther was thoughtfully studying a photograph on the mantle-shelf. She turned to Kyle with her veiled look, a gleam beneath lowered lids. "It is a beautiful face, Mr. Kyle. May I ask who it is?"

It was a likeness of Margaret Acres, handsomely framed. Genuine admiration had induced Kyle to give it a place on his mantle-shelf, for photographed Margaret Acres was really beautiful, the unusual regularity and delicacy of her features framed in her nimbus of soft hair, giving her face a look of extreme purity that atoned for any lack of expression. She appeared young, spirituelle, spotless, too delicate to be touched, too white to be blown upon.

"That is Miss Acres, Margaret Acres," Kyle said. "She does take an extraordinary picture."

"May I see it nearer?" Esther asked.

Kyle took it from the shelf and put it in her hands, standing close beside her while she examined it. She studied it so long that he might have been surprised had he not been too completely absorbed by his own feelings to notice her interest. A few moments before he had wanted to be near her, now he was. A whisper and she would look up at him, and he would learn more of the real Esther than all those weeks of observation had taught him. And to whom was he accountable? He was free to take his joy as he pleased. If he read in her eyes what the hot blood in him at that moment desired, and the cool corner of his brain disdained and declared he would not find, there was all the winter night before them; the future might take care of itself. Yes, and he would show himself nothing more than a Rutledge Ericson. With the curious activity of memory possible to double consciousness, he saw Esther as she had looked three years ago in his office, and again as she had smiled at him that first night in her room. They came in succession, the smile that was appealing, the look that was sincere in its honesty, the humility that had begged for his kindness, and last of all, the confidence in his integrity that had brought her to his room that night.

Kyle had answered the something that was hot and urgent in him. He stood silent, his arms at his sides, observant of the shadows that were almost like bruises beneath Esther's eyes. Her face had fallen into lines, the cheeks thinner than usual, her full lips more tightly pressed; a child's face become too suddenly a woman's, the lines of suffering and experience carved upon it. How old was she? Not more than twenty, and she possessed that carven face and desperate calmness! The flood of tenderness that rose in

Kyle was harder to control than mere passion, for it had been part of him for so long. It in its turn would have gathered her into his arms, but not with the selfish urgency of a moment ago.

She had turned and was looking up at him a little vacantly, her eyes dim as if hurt.

"What is it, Esther?" he asked. "Do you know her?"

"No, I do not know her," she said, very evenly. "She looks so fair and white as new snow—a good woman watching over your room. You do well to—to keep her—there——" Her voice sank under the fire that leapt up in her eyes, and suddenly Kyle understood the hurt, and something more—and the barriers erected by judgment were down.

"*Esther!*"

She looked for a startled instant into his eyes, and flung herself from his involuntary movement, her bare arm across her face, the defensive attitude of the street child. "*Ach! Don't touch me!*" she said between her teeth, "*Don't touch me!*" Then suddenly she began to sob against her arm, chokingly, convulsively. The photograph had fallen from her loosened fingers to the floor.

Kyle went to her and put his hands on her arms. "Listen to me, Esther!" he commanded.

But she shrugged herself out of his hold. "Don't touch me!" she repeated, in strangled tones. "Don't touch me!" She grasped the back of a chair and, dragging it toward her, laid her folded arms on it, burying her face in them; her coils of hair fell aside, leaving the back of her white neck bare.

Kyle stood close, looking at her, but offering no caress. He waited, his eyes on her convulsed shoulders, her white neck, the slim hands that grasped the leather of the chair, and in those long moments of consideration Kyle lived over all his knowledge of Esther, and his own need so suddenly

become a demand. He read the last three years with eyes from which the bandage had fallen. The future was plain to him, what he must have, and what he must of necessity forego. He had grown a little white about the lips; otherwise his look was controlled.

Esther raised her head at last, one hand to her eyes, the other searching her empty sleeve for her handkerchief. There was something so completely helpless in the movement, so utterly childlike, that it softened the lines about Kyle's mouth.

"Take this, Esther," he said, and her groping hand took the handkerchief he offered. She put her face in it, shivering and setting her teeth in an endeavor for calmness.

"I have no control," she whispered to herself. "To-night I have no control."

"Come over here with me and sit down, dear," Kyle said, gently. "I want to talk to you."

She lifted her head, pushing her loosened hair away from her face with both hands. The crimson flush of weeping was beginning to fade. "No—I do not wish to talk, Mr. Kyle. . . . To-night I am not capable of behaving reasonably. If I were not so entirely weary, I should be utterly ashamed. I must go at once down to my room and see if it is possible for me to be myself before morning."

"Not before I have said one or two things I mean to say," Kyle answered. "Then you may go, and I'll try to wait till morning——"

"I will not hear," Esther repeated, with growing firmness, but Kyle saw that her hands shook.

He took them and held them closely. "A word and you may go," he said. "Esther, don't make it hard for me—I love you too much——"

She interrupted him. "Mr. Kyle, *don't!* You never thought to say that to me until to-night—else I should have

known and never have come up here. It is just a strangeness that will leave you. . . . To-morrow when you think over the things you know of me, and the other things you surmise, you will be sorry you have spoken."

"What do you mean?" Kyle asked, sharply.

Her hands grew hot and moist in his, and she tried to take them away, but he drew her to him, holding her hands tightly against his breast; they stood so close that they looked directly into each other's eyes.

"What do you mean?" Kyle repeated, but he knew, and as he looked he saw again the red flecks of color about her dilated pupils, just as he had seen them that morning in his office, three years before.

"I have known ever since that first evening when you came to my room," she said, evenly. "After you telephoned I thought a long time, and tried to remember where I had seen a name like yours. When you stood in my doorway with the light on your face I knew you immediately. I had looked into your eyes once before. I understood at once. You knew about me—all the little gray man, Mr. Burnham, could tell you. During all these three years you did not know what had become of me, then suddenly you discovered that I was here below you, and you came to look at me—to judge me. I was wretched—so I could not act like myself—until I saw how kind your eyes were." Her brilliant look grew dim. "You are a good man, Mr. Kyle. You believe in the goodness of women. You are large-minded and forgiving, so I let you come often. Until to-night you have been so, and now it is my fault that you are different. To-day I am beside myself—I should not have come up here. For a little while you also do not know what you are doing."

"You are wrong," Kyle said. "I have loved you for three years——"

"You don't know what you say," Esther repeated, des-

perately. "Mr. Kyle, let me go. I cannot talk—explain—to-night."

"I will not," Kyle answered, doggedly. "I cannot. We will thrash it out now. . . . Esther, I searched for you for three years. I went into every hell in the city, every hospital, every possible place I could think of, and I kept it up to the day I found you. Aside from my work you have been the most possessing idea I have had. The Ericsons' treatment of you enraged me. I've been angry every day for three years because of you. Don't you see—you *took possession of me*, and I didn't know the real meaning of it till to-night. Even when I realized what had been working in me all this time, my feelings were a jumble, until you looked at me, a little while ago. Then I knew exactly where I was, exactly what I wanted, and will have."

"But you must not keep me," Esther said, trembling so her voice shook.

"I must and I will. If you love me, I shall make you say so." The combative in him had joined hands with growing passion; every pulse in his body was alive.

Esther had paled until her lips even were white, her eyes widened in terror. She had drawn back until she was against the chair, and Kyle felt her hands stiffen in his. "You also are beside yourself—you would do a wrong both to yourself and me——"

Kyle paid no attention to her. "Esther, you remember your letter to Mrs. Ericson?"

She drew a breath that was a catch of pain. "Yes—and you must read that too!" The color swept her face, lowering her eyes.

"I didn't read it until I had to. I thought it might give me a clue—help me to find you. I have always judged you by that letter."

"You judge differently from others——"

"I'm not concerned about others. To my mind that letter was written by a good woman, and my opinion is the one that matters to me. . . . Esther, have you remained the same as the girl who wrote that letter?"

There was perfect silence. The sleet beat sharply against the windows, and in the room was only the sound of the fire, a coal that hissed and fell apart in the grate. Esther had lifted her head at last, and he looked into her eyes; they were dull as they had been when she had glanced about her room that first night.

But she did not look away from him. "When I tell you, you will let me go?" It was half a statement, half a question, spoken not above a whisper.

"If you prove to me that you are different from what I feel you are, I shall let you go. . . . It's the only thing that will move me. . . . Now answer me!"

"I am not."

"You are not speaking truth. The heart of you is the same—the will and courage of you is stronger."

"There was an artist, a friend of Mr. Rieloff, who knew me when I was a little girl—he found me ignorant and in despair. I went with him."

"Did you love him?"

"No."

"Do you love him now?"

"No."

"Why did you go with him?"

"I have said—I was in despair."

"On your own account?" he demanded. "For yourself? Because you were tempted as before?"

She was silent.

"Esther, I love you—I *must* have the truth—*tell me!*"

"I did it for her—my *bal*. . . . Myself—I did not matter. That was what I thought then—I was very igno-

rant." She spoke with humility, but also with a certain dignity, the tremor in her voice gone.

"I knew it," Kyle said. "The girl who came to my office with that alternative presented to her—I've felt sure that was the way it was. . . . And it's for *her* that you work night and day—now. . . . It's of her you're thinking when you seem miles away?" She made him no answer, and he said, "I know—you don't need to tell me."

After a moment he demanded, "And where is *he*?"

"He is dead; but I left him long before that. I endured only a short time."

"And afterwards?"

"I have lived as you have seen. . . . Now let me go."

Kyle was as white as she, but he held her still, unconscious of the strength of his grip. He had never moved his eyes from hers, his gaze sunk in their depths as if he might find there answers even more explicit than her words. And now when there was silence he continued to look, long moments, until she whispered again, and then again, "Let me go. . . . Let me go."

"I will not!" he said, in a long indrawn breath. "No—*never!*"

A wild look swept Esther's face, parting her lips, lighting her eyes, and was choked out of life on the instant, for Kyle's arms had gone around her, lifting her until she lay on his breast. And then he kissed her, her eyes, and the shadows beneath them, her throat and her lips, a murmured word of love that pleaded for response. She was as helpless to move as if bound in iron, motionless, grown rigid.

Kyle took her to the couch, and knelt down beside her. As soon as he released her her hands came together, moving restlessly, clasping and unclasping; she sat still, looking at him with heavy eyes.

"Esther, speak to me," he begged.



"ESTHER, SPEAK TO ME," HE BEGGED.



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"I have nothing to say, Mr. Kyle." Her voice was dry, almost harsh.

"You wouldn't kiss me when I held you. If you don't love me, tell me so. . . . When you looked at me—before you dropped that photograph—I could have sworn that you loved me."

"I do not know how I looked."

"Tell me the truth—do you mean to trifle with me! Don't you understand that I am asking you to be my wife?" He had her hands, stopping their twisting.

Esther looked away from him, over his shoulder, at the fire, the windows; her eyes came back to him, her brow knitted. "If I could tell you that I loved you, I would. It is not often that a woman such as I will refuse what you offer—it is hard for me—but—I cannot tell you that I love you."

Kyle's lower lip lifted. "You haven't tried—you've only known me when I was as blind as a bat. You will make me a different answer by and by."

"I think not, Mr. Kyle." A line of moisture showed on her forehead, just beneath her hair. "As soon as you have time to think, to go out among people like that,"—she nodded to the fallen photograph,—“you will be glad that—that I cannot give you what you wish, and am honest enough to tell you so.” She drew one hand from Kyle's clasp, and softly stroked the back of the big hand that still held one of hers imprisoned. She did not look at him, but at what she was doing, touching him lightly with trembling finger tips. "You have told me of how you live, and your work—in your profession you are very ambitious. I see much of the papers, notices of banquets, society notes, your name is mentioned often—you are to many people quite a personage. . . . And I! . . . Once, long ago, I called myself a lady from nowhere—perhaps in my heart I am still that lady—but to all the

world full of people I have no right even to such a title. . . . Do you not see, Mr. Kyle?" She glanced at him, smiling faintly, her appealing smile. At his look her eyes dropped. "I am sorry that I hurt you—but I can say no other word. If I told you I loved you, I should not be honest."

Kyle studied her averted face, his frowning look changing to one determined and alert. "For the first time to-night I don't believe you," he said deliberately. "I believe you do love me, but you have some reservation of your own. Perhaps you are not quite certain of my sincerity, and you say the usual things—prettily. I expected you to say them. But I am no boy, Esther. When I took you in my arms over there, I knew what I was about. This is no sudden thing with me. I've tried to tell you that you have been part of me for three years, and these last two months—since I found you! Why, I've lived through the day simply because I was going to see you at the end of it. I could have told any other man in two minutes what possessed him. I am perfectly capable of deciding between the things that matter to me and those to which I am indifferent. The question is not whether our decision pleases others—it is quite certain not to please them; there are accepted standards, and petted prejudices that we are quite powerless to change. . . . It is merely the question of what we are in ourselves, and what will mean the greatest happiness to us. To argue that you are not fit to assume the life I offer you because you sit under the world's displeasure, is ridiculous. You are as well fitted for it as I am. The world will not agree to that, you say. Well, the world will grow wiser and somewhat more just as time goes on, and we'll not wait for it. The world won't forgive you your mistakes and misfortunes—but that doesn't prove that the world is in the right. It's what you are in yourself that matters. The good in you has been strong enough to survive experience. I'll go a step farther and declare that experience

has strengthened you, making the better woman of you—and it's that woman I want. . . . I do care for the opinion of the world—who does not? But it doesn't weigh a grain of sand against my own convictions, and my *need*. Esther, if I can come to you after my day's work is done, and lay my head in your lap, I shall be content. I am not impulsive and I have chosen. I told myself years ago that when I found a woman who meant what you do to me, I should marry her, no matter who she was, or where I found her. . . . Take back what you said, Esther!"

"No," Esther replied, gently, "it is not in my power. . . . Mr. Kyle, do not say any more. . . . I look ahead, and you see only a little way. You speak very like a man. If a woman wishes something desperately, a thing that is not good for her, she uses a small tablespoonful of sense. But a man! It is with him not one little teaspoonful." She had brought into play her slight shrug and lift of the hands: "Ach, Mr. Kyle!" But there was something very near to tears in her attempt at lightness.

Kyle caught her lifted hands. "Esther! . . . I wonder which it is in you I love the best—the child or the woman? . . . I have looked ahead. If you come to me you are mine to have, and to hold, and protect, you and all that belongs to you. My shoulders are broad enough to carry your misfortunes, and my arm strong enough to fight your battles—there is a quality in me that would rejoice in doing it, I think. . . . We will ask nothing of the world—we don't need it particularly, do we? If we ask nothing of it, it will leave us alone. I can be much as I am now, if you demand it of me, and you need concern yourself as little with people as you do now—it would be the easiest and the simplest way for us, but we would be a good deal to each other. You are frightened of love, and I don't wonder, but I *know* I have the power to make you love me, and I want all the love it

is in you to give—I have fed on husks a long time. . . . Esther, take back what you said?”

She at last met his determined look fairly. “No, Mr. Kyle. I, too, have chosen.”

He studied her unfaltering eye, and the close set of her lips, in silence. Then he asked, “You will none of me, Esther?”

“Your kindness, and your respect, Mr. Kyle, I shall beg for that—always.”

The blood darkened his face, and he eyed her a moment, uncertainly; then he rose and stood over her. “I have not had my last word,” he said, deliberately. “I think if I took you in my arms and kissed you long enough, you would in the end answer me more truthfully.”

“From what you know of me, I think, perhaps, you have a right to judge me—a woman of slight will.” There was a touch of humility in her manner.

“If I were asking something wrong of you I should not say that,” he returned, quickly. “I have given you proof of my confidence. I want your brain, your good judgment as well as your heart, Esther. I have any amount of patience and determination, and time will straighten out our difficulties. . . . Am I to leave it at that?”

“Yes, Mr. Kyle.”

“And, Esther, I am not going to let you kill yourself as you have been doing. A very little—just now—would make it possible for you to—”

She lifted her hands as if to ward off questioning or protest. “Yes, yes, Mr. Kyle. Another time I will tell—explain. I have already chosen about that. I decided in the long night when I sat awake—that is done—ended. A day, two days, what does it matter now? I will tell you my affairs, and my difficulties fully—I must do so after what you have told me to-night, but just now I do not feel able.

I can bear no more to-night." Her eyes had left his, and she sat with drooping shoulders. She looked exhausted, utterly spent, weighed down with trouble.

"Yes," Kyle said, with compunction. "You are not fit to sit up, and I have done my share in making you ill, I think. Only don't shut me out from confidence, Esther; be a little just to me. You have the power to hurt me terribly, and to make me happy also. Give me all you can of yourself, and I shall win my way." The passion he was curbing spoke in his look and words.

She winced, moving restlessly. "To hurt you—yes," she said so low that Kyle scarcely caught it. Her brows knitted in thought, pondering a thing that troubled her. "I must go down now," she added more clearly.

"Yes, come," he said. "You are worn out. It seems a lifetime since I promised to take you down if you would sit with me a little."

She rose unsteadily, and Kyle took her arm. "You *are* ill," he exclaimed in distress. "You're not fit to be alone through the night."

"I am only so tired I could die," Esther answered. "It is just that. When I lie down I shall sleep, and to-morrow morning I will have more courage." They had reached the door, but there she stopped and looked about her. "It is a beautiful place, your home," she said. "I look because I shall not see it again."

"Will you not? It is yours as much as mine," Kyle declared, but she turned away without a word.

They went to the door of her room in silence, and there Kyle waited for her to say good-night in her own fashion, for he saw the quiver of her lips, and the uncertain movements of her hands.

She stood looking up at him, her eyes wide and troubled. "But, Mr. Kyle, you are not sorry that I came?" She

asked it softly, pleadingly, as if his silence meant reproach, and Kyle took her chin in his hand and, lifting her face, kissed her lips.

"No! . . . My Lady from Nowhere!"

She allowed him his moments of joy, apparently unmoved, but when his hand dropped she took it and, bending her head suddenly, laid her cheek against it, a touch light and swift. The next moment he stared at her closed door. It was a caress, but Kyle had a curious feeling that it was accompanied by an unspoken word of farewell.

CHAPTER XVI

IF Kyle's sleepless night brought him satisfaction, his expression the next morning did not show it. He went to his office early, for when disturbed work was a sedative, but he was not destined to banish Esther from his thoughts that day. He found a card on his desk that claimed his instant attention; it read: *Mrs. Gustav Rieloff*. The card was not altogether clean, and the writing was uncertain. Kyle examined it, then rang for the office boy.

"When was this Mrs. Rieloff here?" he demanded.

"Late yesterday afternoon, sir."

"Did she leave any message—say when she would be back?" The boy was impressed by Kyle's manner.

"No, sir. She asked for you, and I told her you was out. She said, 'I'll leave my card and come again.' She seemed sort of uncertain, dazed like, and I asked her if there was any message, but she said, 'No,' and went away."

Kyle considered a moment. "Of course, she didn't leave any address?"

"No, sir."

"What does she look like?"

"She's kinder tall and big," the boy said, "and her hands was shaking when she gave me the card. She looked kinder queer, like she was sick. She wasn't young, either."

"What sort is she?" Kyle asked.

The boy was a little fellow of quick wits, a street child Kyle had picked up in some of his wanderings. He was being given his chance in the office, and Kyle sometimes found his acumen useful. He had sent him to a night school, and taken pains to subdue his street vernacular, but

on important occasions he remained uncorrected, for he was shrewdest in his native tongue.

He made a gesture of contempt. "She's a bad un, sir—bet a cracker she dopes, too."

"How was she dressed?"

"Like her clothes had been out in the rain—like she didn't have nothing but what she walked in."

"Did she wear a large white hat, and a feather boa?"

The boy's eyes widened slightly. "Yes, sir."

"I see," Kyle said. "Now, remember, when she comes in I want to see her. If I happen to be out, keep her, and get word to me, no matter where I am."

"Yes, sir."

So the woman he had seen in the hall the night before had been Mrs. Rieloff. If he had not been dull-witted it would have occurred to him. And Esther said she had come for money; her ten thousand dollars had sped rapidly then. Possibly she had been to Mrs. Ericson as well? If so, Mrs. Ericson was likely to know of Esther, and it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Rutledge Ericson might again come into Esther's life. At this point Kyle closed the door into the outer office; he wanted to walk up and down unobserved.

Kyle's night of meditation had left him stranded on uncertainty. Did Esther love him, or was she merely grateful and anxious not to offend one whom she trusted and liked? To what extent had she been honest when she had refused to return his caresses? How much had she concealed? The touch of her cheek against his hand had left him burning, for there was a sentence of Esther's that memory suddenly vivified; he could even see its position on the page of her letter to Mrs. Ericson: "I held him a long distance away; I would not even touch his hand; but when I was alone I would in my thoughts lay my cheek against it." She had

told Kyle that she could not in honesty say she loved him, yet her cheek was hot to his touch. She had not refused him her lips, but she had taken his caress unmoved. Was it only the desire to send him away more content that had prompted her to cling to his hand for that vivid moment? . . . But conjecture landed him nowhere.

It was the recollection of Mrs. Rieloff's card on his desk that brought him to the consideration of immediate necessity. As he had said to Esther, time would straighten out their difficulties, and Kyle could see no better way than to trust to it for a solution. He called upon his patience to aid his determination; if Esther loved him she would not in the end deny him. It was his reading of her character; where her heart was Esther would finally be. He meant to hold and use every advantage she had given him, and with the confidence of the man who has conquered much and builded his own future, Kyle felt able for the task. But he must have time, and Esther's need was immediate. She must have relief from strain and overwork, the hourly anxiety over money. Kyle knew what her struggle must have been. She had been only partially equipped to earn her livelihood, and there had been the child as well. No wonder she pushed the hair back from her face and looked at him only vaguely when he interrupted her at her work. Perhaps the child was his rival? Probably she gave it all the affection she possessed? Kyle had always shrunk at the thought of Esther's child; he winced now at the thought of it, but it was part of Esther, one of the things that hurt but that must be endured; he set it aside with the rest that was painful. It lay in Esther to give him more than sufficient reward. Had those things mattered when he held her in his arms? Kyle stopped at his window and looked out for a time, thinking as he had the night before when he was staring down on Esther's shaking shoulders, that even if his judgment counselled it,

there was no going back possible to him. Whether Esther loved him or not, she possessed him completely.

He went back to his desk and sat down, taking up Mrs. Rieloff's card and frowning over it. He must see the woman and send her away. It would be better to have her out of Mrs. Ericson's reach, and where she could not annoy Esther. Kyle had puzzled over the meaning of some of Esther's remarks. In the long night during which she had sat awake she had decided on some course. He had concluded that Esther had of necessity decided to return to the stage. It was the only explanation he could offer for her remark, and she had evaded his questions because she disliked to tell him of her decision. Kyle told himself now that he would not endure it; if the heavens fell he would prevent it. It was the surest way to draw the Ericsons' attention to her; there were others who knew her history, and it would become public knowledge. He wanted to take her and hide her away from the eyes of others, a life to be lived by themselves.

It was while frowning over Mrs. Rieloff's card and his thoughts that an ingenious idea occurred to Kyle. Mrs. Rieloff had suggested Mr. Rieloff to him, and then a possibility. Kyle considered for a time, his look grown alert. He would have to see Mr. Rieloff; it would take him from the city for a day or two, but his plan was perfectly feasible; why had it not occurred to him before? The more he pondered it the more keen was his satisfaction. He decided that he would go to Baltimore on the following day and see Mr. Rieloff, for, in his persistent search for Esther, Kyle had not lost sight of the old man. He knew that as late as October of the previous year Mr. Rieloff was living. If he found Mr. Rieloff entirely incapable of assisting him he intended to run a risk and take other means of carrying out his plan. The thought of Esther relieved of anxiety, and free to decide her future unhampered by necessity, was a joy to Kyle.

To his disappointment Mrs. Rieloff did not appear, but he could not delay for that; the first thing was to bring relief to Esther and forestall any plan of hers to return to the theatre; he was quite competent to handle Mrs. Rieloff later on. Kyle judged that through some source the woman had learned of his interest in Esther, and had come to him for money, just as she had gone to Esther. She was evidently in straits.

Kyle stopped at Esther's door that evening, but his knock failed of response, and he went on to his own apartment with the certainty that she was at the theatre. Kyle was thoroughly annoyed and very anxious. Why had she acted so quickly? He felt a still greater eagerness to carry out his plan. He had wanted the sight of her, a moment in which to tell her that he would be away for a day, the wish to find her looking less heavy-eyed and worn than the night before. In returning to the theatre she had done a rash thing, and now, of course, he would not be able to see her before he left, for he intended to go early in the morning. Kyle could not rest in his room. It was snowing steadily, and she would be coming home in the storm.

He called a taxicab and made a round of some of the likely theatres, going first to the Gaiety, but he did not find Esther in any chorus. At ten o'clock he gave up his endeavor; it was a hopeless quest; the field was too large. He was on his way home when he remembered Floyd-Kaufman's invitation to see the Russian dancer, and Margaret Acres' remark that Mrs. Ericson would be there. If Mrs. Ericson knew of his intimacy with Esther, could she refrain from remark, from some indication that she knew? It was worth trying. Kyle ordered his chauffeur to turn about and take him northward again.

He entered the theatre at the beginning of the last interval, and stood for a moment overlooking a crowded

house; then, levelling his glasses on the boxes, he easily distinguished Floyd-Kaufman's party, for the women were conspicuous. Mrs. Ericson was accentuated in black and diamonds, Margaret Acres was more pallid and fragile than usual in pale mauve and yellow orchids, and Mrs. Floyd-Kaufman looked too solid and fresh-colored in white and pearls. The fourth, a small dark woman in flame red, Kyle did not know. He knew all the men, Floyd-Kaufman, his heavy face just above Margaret Acres' aureola of fair hair; Eugene Cannon, the playwright, slender and aquiline, bent close to Mrs. Ericson's ear; Carl Berthold, the banker; and Wayland Jones, editor and well-known clubman whose claim to popularity with women was his capacity to shock jaded sensibilities. His unrighteous sayings were *bon mots* in Mrs. Ericson's circle, and welcome additions to inner Bohemia. Kyle did not feel drawn to the party, but his mission was for Esther, and he hastened to take advantage of the *entr'acte*.

Floyd-Kaufman received him with his usual cordiality. "Well, this is good fortune! Sit here, Kyle—we'll have an extra chair in a second."

"No, take my place," Eugene Cannon said, rising. "I'm going across the way for a few minutes anyhow. This act's a short one, and I'll see you all at supper."

"Thank you, Cannon, but come back after the interval," Kyle returned. "I have only ten minutes to spare, and just looked in on my way."

"But you're coming to supper?" Floyd-Kaufman objected.

Kyle declined. "No; I'm sorry I can't stay, Floyd." He had the seat beside Mrs. Ericson, and was satisfied.

"And you have not seen Aleksandra!" Mrs. Ericson said. She wore her alert look that was appraising in spite of being so round-eyed.

"No, but not from lack of intention. I have simply been

too preoccupied of late. I've not been to the theatre in weeks." Kyle waited expectantly for her answer. He knew if she had anything to say to him she would probably say it at once. She would not let the opportunity pass.

"Yes? . . . But Aleksandra will interest you—she's your type. You'll stay out the act when you see her. She has what some one has called a moonlit face with shadows." Mrs. Ericson had lowered her voice, but Margaret Acres caught the remark.

"That's generous of you, Maud," she said, drawlingly. She spoke over her shoulder, a smile for Kyle, and a cool glance that lingered for a moment on the elder woman. "She judges you by Rutledge, Mr. Kyle. I don't know why."

Floyd-Kaufman followed Margaret Acres' lead. "Where is Rutledge, Maud?" he asked. "By all accounts he ought to be here. He followed Aleksandra to London, didn't he? Why not to New York? Did she prove obdurate? We were holding our breaths over here awaiting developments."

"Mr. Kyle doesn't know the story," Margaret Acres supplemented, languidly. "Last autumn, Mr. Kyle, Rutledge took Maud and myself to see Madame Aleksandra. It was her last night in Paris, but we none of us had seen her before. Rutledge sat spellbound through the first act, and then disappeared. Actually, Maud and I had to see ourselves home, and the next morning before we were up he was off to London—he caught Aleksandra's boat! Of course, poor Maud, being his shadow, had to follow, and I was left in Paris unchaperoned. I had to take refuge with some people I scarcely knew—things moved in a terrible hurry."

"What was the trouble, Maud?" Floyd-Kaufman teased.

"Did he find an Artemis or an Aphrodite?" was Wayland Jones' contribution. "We all know he entered on a prolonged Dionysia."

Mrs. Ericson was apparently unmoved. "Oh, Rutledge!"

she said, in the tone she always adopted when speaking of her son in public. "He is about as accountable as a will-o'-the-wisp. After a week in London he found twenty faces that pleased him better. I went after him because he was ill and not fit to be alone."

"He's a night wanderer at any rate, Maud, and from all accounts you'd better not leave him alone now," Floyd-Kaufman advised.

Mrs. Ericson sighed, very audibly, and Margaret Acres smiled coldly to herself. Mrs. Ericson leaned back then, turning an indifferent shoulder on the others, a movement that brought her closer to Kyle, and he looked directly into her eyes as he asked, "Why my type, Maud? Describe it?"

She lifted her brows, her smile more twisted than usual, and Kyle knew that beneath her air of indifference she was both excited and angry. "White and black, long eyes and a mouth like a scarlet passion flower—a face like that is hard to hide, even in New York. . . . Even in a fifth story back." She spoke near his ear, but distinctly. She had given him what he came for.

"You arouse my curiosity," he returned, promptly. "I shall certainly wait to see Aleksandra." His look had kindled despite his will.

"She will serve you as a reminder," Mrs. Ericson said in the same tone. "There is the curtain—judge for yourself."

For a tense moment Kyle had imagined that he might see Esther herself on the stage, for the mention of Rutledge Ericson had lashed sharply the emotional tension under which he had been laboring for twenty-four hours; under such excitement even impossibilities seemed credible. But Aleksandra was not Esther. Kyle understood Mrs. Ericson's remark, however, and Margaret Acres' story remained significant, for Aleksandra's long eyes and expanse of white eyelid reminded him strongly of Esther. She possessed some-

what the same shadowy face that not even her make-up could disguise, and the clean curves of her body, the figure of a bayadere, fascinated Kyle. She and Esther drew their likeness from the same source, the oriental in them too marked to be mistaken, and the barbarian had its part as well, lying just beneath the surface. This pantomime ballet from its choice of subject accentuated oriental attributes. The richness of Asiatic costuming, the languor and passion of the far East were brought into play and given subtle expression by a master in her peculiar art. Aleksandra's dancing affected Kyle curiously, arousing the faint sense of repulsion that is frequently an ingredient of fascination. It struck across his excited senses, stirring him unaccountably, until he realized that it was Esther who spoke to him in every movement of the woman on the stage; slow, languorous, beseeching, alluring; or quick, tense, vivid with passion, arms outstretched, narrow eyes a gleam, yet throughout the perfect restraint in abandon that is the essence of allure. Then passion rose and swept him as it had the night before, only more insistently, for in the vision that moved before his eyes there was no appeal to tenderness, no touch of the helpless and bewildered.

Kyle had drawn back in his chair, his face no longer under control; in the half light he was flushed to purple, the vein in his forehead swollen into a ridge. He had drawn back in order to breathe better, not for fear of observation; the world encompassed only one creature beside himself, and he had looked down on her shaking shoulders, and waited before taking her into his arms, and after she had lain there he had had the strength to let her go! . . . But that had been Esther, not this parody of her. He looked away from the stage determinedly, down at the hand on his knee.

Mrs. Ericson had turned a little in her seat, watching him. "She will serve as a reminder," she had said. In

her meagre knowledge and large suspicion of Kyle's relation to Esther, how was she to judge of his expression? The aroused animal in a man's face was not an unknown sight to Maud Ericson. She knew the look of the satisfied and retrospective male quite as well. How was it between Esther and Kyle? It meant much to her to know. She had left her son at a critical time, at a day's notice, simply because she must discover immediately whether Kyle possessed Esther or only espoused her cause. She *must* know. If Esther belonged to Kyle, Mrs. Ericson's house of cards was comparatively secure. If he was of the same mind as two years before, if he still looked on Esther and her misfortunes as he did on that never-to-be-forgotten night when she had allowed passion to rule her, and had screamed her rage and jealousy at him, her house would be about her ears—of a surety it would be.

Mrs. Ericson was under an obsession stronger than love or hate, and fear was handmaiden to it. She had lost no whit of her love for Kyle, it was the stronger because of jealous uncertainty, but at that moment she would have welcomed the discovery that Kyle had the power to take Esther and hide her out of sight. She must move carefully, carefully; Kyle's expression did not fully satisfy her. She had not spoken in haste that night; she had been clear in her intention; she had intended to sound a warning, and Margaret Acres had unconsciously aided her in her purpose. If Kyle feared for Esther, if he wished to keep her for himself, he would remove her, hide her as soon as possible. If he meant to give Esther and her child their right—as Maud Ericson saw it—he might be pricked into anger and immediately reveal his purpose; it would be far better for him to attack her than Rutledge. That was a contingency she could not contemplate. The possibility of it had brought her across the Atlantic. Mrs. Ericson had moved in a network of

anxieties so long that her senses had become able antennæ. Kyle's look was not one of anger; Mrs. Ericson read it aright. He was as unconscious of her at that moment as he was of Floyd-Kaufman, or anyone else in his neighborhood. Beneath the acute anxiety that made her abnormally watchful was a consuming rage at the woman who could bring that look into Kyle's face. And Rutledge—into what extremity of folly had Esther not led him!

The curtain fell upon Aleksandra, and the audience stirred, but remained seated, clamoring for her reappearance. Floyd-Kaufman stood up, applauding vigorously, but at Kyle's farewell touch on his arm he turned.

"Oh, stay!" he urged.

"I can't," Kyle said. "I've overstayed my time already. Thanks for a pleasure, Floyd," and he disappeared.

But Floyd-Kaufman was after him. "Kyle, you'll not forget Friday?"

Kyle paused. "I meant to ask you to fill my place, Floyd. I am simply driven this week." His voice was husky.

"I'll not!" Floyd-Kaufman declared, in sudden heat. "What's come over you, Kyle? I told you I was going to give you the sensation of the year. If I'd drop you a hint you would come fast enough, but I won't do it."

Kyle had no wish to anger the big man, besides he wanted to be alone. "I shall be out of town to-morrow, and possibly all day Thursday—there is always the chance of a delay, that's all," Kyle explained. "I expect to return on Thursday at latest, but there is the chance."

"Well, Thursday's not Friday," Floyd-Kaufman insisted, testily. "If this was the usual thing I wouldn't urge—I know you don't like 'em—every man to his taste—but it's not, and I want you particularly."

Kyle had experienced Floyd-Kaufman's pertinacity before, and knew what it meant. "I will be there," he promised.

"Good! And, Kyle, if you are delayed for any reason, telegraph me before Friday afternoon." Floyd-Kaufman's manner had the same emphasis he had shown the night before.

"Certainly I will." Kyle was in a fever to be gone, but even in his impatience he wondered at Floyd-Kaufman's gravity.

In five minutes he had forgotten him and his concerns completely. There was a throbbing in his throat that made speaking difficult; another restless night before him, and it would be a day, possibly two, before he could see Esther again! And Mrs. Ericson knew then that they dwelt under the same roof, and she meant also to tell him that her son had not altogether forgotten the girl he had wronged—that he had found the dancer fascinating because she had reminded him of Esther. It might be true, or it might not; probably it was not, and was suggested to him only for his greater discomfort. But Esther could do nothing without money. She could not even change her residence without a greater expense than she could afford. Kyle was still firm in his intention to make her independent through Mr. Rieloff, and do it at once, but after that? He would gladly have answered the question if he could.

In the gray light of early morning he pushed a note beneath Esther's door—a few words only to tell her that he would be gone for a day; a plea to see her on his return; he did not trust himself to say more.

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CHAPTER XVII

KYLE did not return until noon on Thursday. He had been forced to carry out his plan for Esther without assistance from Mr. Rieloff, for the old man was not capable of grasping Kyle's manner, or understanding his explanations; he had become little better than a child, his recollections maundering and fitful. Esther he had forgotten completely. Nevertheless Kyle acted in Mr. Rieloff's name, deliberately running the risk of possible future complications, for some immediate relief for Esther appeared to him too urgent a necessity to be withheld because of any small objection.

On his return to New York Kyle learned that Mrs. Rieloff had not appeared during his absence. If the woman was in need of money he felt certain he could persuade or force her to leave New York. She should not approach Esther again if he could prevent it. Kyle's wish to remove Mrs. Rieloff both from Esther's and Mrs. Ericson's proximity was so urgent that he took steps to locate her. To find her Kyle feared would be a difficult matter; still chance might assist him.

But his greatest desire was to see Esther. He left his office early in the afternoon, thinking that at that hour he would certainly find her in her room, but his knock received no more response than it had two days before. He was turning away, frowning and unsatisfied, when an edge of white beneath the door caught his eye. Kyle had a suspicion even before he touched it. It was, as he guessed, his own note resting where he had put it two days before. Kyle went on to his own rooms, feeling both puzzled and anxious. Had Esther gone away in order to avoid him? Was she with her

child? He realized rather blankly that he had no possible means of discovering her—and she had gone without a word to him.

Kyle questioned the janitor, and learned that Esther had left late on Tuesday afternoon. Her instructions to the man had been brief: she might be gone for some time, or only for a few days; she could not tell; but she retained her apartment, as she wanted to return to it; to those who inquired he might simply say that she was out of the city. Kyle asked if there had been any inquiries, and was told that in the last two days several people had called to see Esther. From the janitor's description Kyle concluded that the small woman, beautifully dressed and closely veiled, who had come in an electric brougham, was Mrs. Ericson, but Kyle did not recognize the two men who had been persistent in their endeavors to see Esther; one was middle aged and large, the janitor declared, the other was a younger man. He was firm in his declaration that they were "swells," and Kyle learned that both had been liberal in their fees. The younger man had asked so many questions for which he had no answer, that the janitor decided he was a reporter; he had even asked to be shown Esther's room, a liberty which had been denied him.

There was cause for anxiety in the information Kyle had received. Esther besieged by visitors, and of the kind the janitor described! Mrs. Ericson, and men who stayed to question and were willing to pay well for information! It occurred to Kyle that possibly the men were connected with theatrical interests. But why should they bestir themselves over Esther? Only some unusual occurrence could have brought this attention upon her. And Mrs. Ericson? It must have been fear of these visitors then that had driven her away, not the desire to avoid his urgency. But she had gone without a word to him, no explanation, no expression even of regret, and after what had passed between them. He

had spent two days in her service, and returned to this. When she bade him good-by she must have known that she was going—she had spoken of the long night she had sat through beneath her skylight, considering, deciding; she had said, "I have already chosen—that is done—ended," and when she left his room she had stopped to look about her. "I look, for I shall not see it again," she had remarked. She had evaded, put him off, appearing too weary to speak, and then she had gone without a word. The hurt lay in that. Did she think that such devotion as he had offered her was a thing to be lightly treated? During their acquaintance Esther had stirred many emotions in Kyle; she had both hurt and angered him, but not as she did now; this anger was actual pain, this hurt acute misery, for every passion was alive in him now, love, anger, jealousy, and on the heels of them all came the tenderness that was an ineradicable part of Kyle, the gnawing anxiety over her welfare that would not leave him for a moment. . . . How long could he endure suspense? Must his search for her begin again? He lay through the night in a fever—he drove himself to work in the morning, and balked at it—he had done nothing, thought of nothing, but Esther. He had always been proud of his strength of will, and he was reduced to this limit of endurance—it was unbelievable.

Kyle came home in the murk and fog of early twilight; why sit any longer in his office? He must think out some plan, find relief somewhere; another twenty-four hours like the last was more than he could contemplate. The telephone on his table rang and he answered it mechanically, "Well?"

"Kyle, that you?" It was Floyd-Kaufman's nasal voice.

"Yes." Kyle bit off the word savagely.

"Oh, beg pardon!" Floyd-Kaufman returned, with the quick apprehension that was one of his characteristics. "It is a beastly night, I'll grant."

But Kyle was in no mood for laughter. "What is it, Floyd?" he inquired.

"Nothing. I only wanted to know if you were back, and would be here to-night."

Kyle had forgotten the engagement as completely as he had everything that did not concern Esther, and it was only the habit of control that restrained the oath on his lips. Spend an evening at Floyd-Kaufman's when every nerve in his body was alive! . . . But would he be any better off at home? He had dreaded beyond anything the hours he must spend alone with his thoughts. What difference whether he was here or there?

"Yes, I am coming," he replied.

"Good! At nine then, Kyle," and Floyd-Kaufman wasted no more words.

Kyle turned away from the table, and in an excess of irritation cursed Floyd-Kaufman and everything connected with him; the man's persistence was ridiculous!

Kyle was one of the last arrivals at Number Thirteen. He had given no more consideration to his possible fellow guests than to his host's form of entertainment for the evening, consequently he felt genuine surprise at the character of the company Floyd-Kaufman had brought together. Four of the men who were grouped about the fire were millionaire art lovers, who like Floyd-Kaufman could boast of valuable art collections. They were not friends of Floyd-Kaufman, not even social intimates. One of the four was from Chicago, a man who happened to be in the city, and another was from Boston. Two were of New York, John J. Bascome, small, gray, beetle-browed, a bachelor still at sixty, a multimillionaire and constant donor to the museums of the city, and Willis K. Cloud, slender, erect, with the look of youth at forty, the possessor of a small nervous moustache,

and an equally nervous hand, an omnivorous art collector known to be as jealous of a painting as an amorous man of his mistress.

Kyle was still more surprised to find Christian Aronson of the company. He was a large man, fair and bald, with a curved nose, and an opaque gray-lidded eye, a Swede on his mother's side, and of Floyd-Kaufman's nationality on his father's. He had begun as traveller for a London and Paris art company, circling the globe annually for his firm, and was now at the head of the largest art firm in New York. He was an undisputed authority on art values, and in judging and appraising paintings he was supreme. John J. Bascome was an aristocrat, fitted for art appreciation both by heredity and training; Christian Aronson was the commercialist of immense experience, possessed of accurate art feeling; in Willis Cloud art appreciation was a passion, and Floyd-Kaufman had all the oriental love of form and color characteristic of his race. Kyle had been too much engrossed by his own concerns to give any thought to Floyd-Kaufman's intention for the evening, but he realized when he saw this group of men that only an unusual interest could have brought them together.

A group of five entered just after Kyle, an art critic, two artists, one a Frenchman, another a Russian, both color extremists and ardent realists, and a young man who stood half a head taller than the two foreigners. The Frenchman was saying inflammable things about the weather to the tall young man, who answered him briefly but in very good French. There had just been a lavish distribution of cocktails and whiskey and soda, and the party stood behind Kyle, gesticulating and somewhat noisy.

Kyle had seated himself beside John Bascome, who was apparently too much engrossed by the contemplation of Floyd-Kaufman's somewhat remarkable collection of paintings to

be inclined for conversation. It was a relief to Kyle to find some one who like himself preferred to be silent. The little man sat nursing his thin knee, his heavy brows drawn down over his eyes, and Kyle wondered a little absently what he thought of Floyd-Kaufman's evident admiration of the nude in art, for he had been so steadily observing a vivid conception known as "The Field of Iris." It was to Kyle's mind a detestable production, a bluey-white fleshed woman standing in a field of iris, a garland of peacock feathers about her neck. Merely as a study in color, even Kyle granted it merit. It had created some sensational interest in Paris, and Floyd-Kaufman had brought it back with him some twelve months before, taking pains that his purchase should be well advertised. It was not the only painting in the room that had been bought by him simply because it had some ulterior value. As a means to an end the room was interesting. Each picture was hung with care, and skilfully arranged for display by artificial light, the entire effect one of extreme simplicity. There were chairs and couches grouped about tables that bore every device for smoking, but aside from that the room was unencumbered by furniture. The upper walls were almost entirely covered by paintings, the lower inconspicuously panelled. The few oriental rugs, art treasures in themselves, saved the place from bareness, and the wide fireplace with its smouldering log added the touch of comfort. The only drapery in the room concealed the entrance into Floyd-Kaufman's miniature theatre; his luxurious lounging-room, dining-room, and bed-rooms lay just across the entrance hall.

John Bascome surveyed the room critically, then he turned on Kyle. "Extraordinary!" he remarked. "There's not a properly clothed creature in the place, man, or woman, or child."

"A recent affectation of Floyd-Kaufman's," Kyle explained, contemptuously. "Everything else has been sent

up to his new house, I suppose. I have not been here in months, but there used to be an admixture of other things, green oases in a flesh-tinted desert."

"And this thing," John Bascome said, indicating the painting he had been considering, "this purple iris dame with her scanty drapery of peacock's eyes—the endeavor of that man was not to paint the body, his object was to make the fact of nakedness as apparent as possible."

"Have you noticed the gem beside it?" Kyle asked. It was a small canvas by Whelcher.

"Yes. It's so truly art that one sees only the beautiful. I like Whelcher's things, though they are as a general thing too statuesque, not live enough." John Bascome glanced up at Kyle, his eyes under their shaggy brows as bright as a terrier's. "Our host is a curious combination of correct feeling and decadent taste. Above all he has the genius of the showman, and either consciously or otherwise he plays with his treasures. Look around the room. There are two other horrors like this purple woman, but next to each of them, close beside it, is something pleasing."

"Isn't that characteristic of Floyd-Kaufman himself?" Kyle remarked.

"I don't know him," John Bascome returned, equably. "We have never come into any direct contact, except in the purchase of paintings. We bid against each other for that Whelcher, and he came out ahead. There were Floyd-Kaufman, Cloud, and myself all at it last year in Paris, with Aronson in the tussle as well."

"Why are we here to-night?" Kyle inquired.

John Bascome laughed appreciatively. "And you are also one of the blind! Frankly, I'm the victim of curiosity. Floyd-Kaufman informed me that Cloud, Aronson, and those gentlemen from Chicago and Boston were coming, that he purposed no social event, nothing more important than the

art sensation of the year. If Cloud and Aronson and those others were coming, I knew that Floyd-Kaufman's intention was quite as earnest as his manner. On inquiry I find that Cloud came because he was assured that Aronson and John Bascome were coming, and Aronson in his turn because Cloud and myself would be here. The Chicago gentleman tells the same story—the egg within the egg! An endless chain! . . . And you also?"

Kyle was amused. "No, I was not deceived, I was bullied. . . . The men behind us say that they are to see, if not Aleksandra herself, certainly one of her company."

"Floyd-Kaufman knows better than to lure me to one of his theatricals," John Bascome said, decidedly.

"Some one behind me has just remarked that his friend Floyd has better judgment than to ask him to view ancient history. He is certainly well acquainted with Floyd's collection."

"Yes, I heard the remark. That is Cunanne, our unbiassed art critic. He writes columns at Floyd-Kaufman's bidding. He launched this purple lady upon New York's artistic sea. I wish they would keep their French sensations at home."

"Cunanne?" Kyle said. "I remember I used to meet him at Marc Pemberton's." He turned to look at the group behind him, but the head and shoulders of the tall young man who was leaning against the back of Kyle's chair obstructed the view. Kyle could not see his face, but a conviction as sudden as a blow in the face lifted Kyle to his feet and kept him standing. His movement released the chair, and it slipped a little on the smooth floor. The young man drew himself up, his hand gone suddenly to the small of his back as if to soothe a twinge of pain, then turning about he saw Kyle. His black brows came together for a moment in a puzzled search of memory, then his look cleared.

"Why—hello, Kyle!" he exclaimed.

Behind his pince-nez the elder man's eyes had the look of blue steel. "Well met, Ericson," he said. He was, or appeared to be, looking too steadily into Rutledge Ericson's eyes to see his extended hand.

Rutledge shoved aside the chair, and took a limping step that brought them nearer to each other. He had flushed somewhat under Kyle's peculiar greeting, his haughty-lipped, bold-eyed face become suddenly sullen. The expression aged him, deepening the premature lines about his mouth, making his skin appear rough and turgid. He looked more the practised drinker than the dissipated youth. Rutledge had changed greatly since Kyle had last seen him, but though he had lost the rich color of youth, and grown thinner, he had not parted with his good looks. He had been an extremely handsome boy; he was now a handsome man on whose features continued dissipation had impressed telltale marks. Kyle knew his type well; if he lived to be forty he would be decrepit.

"From the way you spoke my name I doubted if you knew me," Rutledge remarked, tentatively. There was no lack of fire in his questioning glance.

Kyle was cool. "You must pardon surprise. I met Mrs. Ericson only a few days ago, and understood you were in Paris. Your latest fad must be an aeroplane?" Rutledge had greeted Kyle intimately, remembering him vaguely as his mother's friend, but Kyle's manner was entirely neutral, the air of an indifferent acquaintance. Rutledge's anger had risen at the repulse, but for some reason the mention of Mrs. Ericson cooled him.

"Oh, my mother!" he said, shrugging, his manner grown as composed as Kyle's. "Hasn't she learned yet to stop accounting for me? A fever for New York took possession of her, and, as I couldn't bear to be left alone, I followed. . . . I intend to stay." There was all of Mrs. Ericson's veiled

insolence in his glance—all of his father's cool decision in his words. Kyle's feeling toward Rutledge Ericson had hitherto been largely compounded of contempt, but much stronger feelings lay dormant in Kyle, and under Rutledge's look and words they sprang into life.

"You really intend to become a God-fearing citizen of the United States then?" Kyle inquired, smilingly ironical.

"Why do you ask him embarrassing questions?" Floyd-Kaufman demanded, at Kyle's elbow. "Rutledge, I told you in excellent English that Aleksandra would not be here to-night, didn't I?"

"The information was unnecessary," Rutledge retorted, in his usual careless manner. "Madame Aleksandra does not give parlor entertainments."

"Listen to the boy!" Floyd-Kaufman exclaimed. "A God-fearing citizen indeed! Aleksandra told me she was going back to Paris in a month. Is she, Rutledge?"

"You know Madame Aleksandra's intentions far better than I," Rutledge replied, pleasantly.

Floyd-Kaufman only laughed. He was evidently excited, his small black eyes quick and eager.

"You are not going to feed us, Floyd. What are you going to do?" Rutledge asked.

"Wait and see."

"If you are unveiling a portrait, or dedicating a statue, allow me to leave now. Cunanne is hopeful. He declares you have discovered a danseuse of fascinating proportions."

Floyd-Kaufman laughed. "Cunanne is the one accurately informed person here, and he was deceiving you. However, I predict that you'll be entertained."

"So Cunanne has been paid to mislead me. Very well, I shall go for him," and Rutledge turned away with a careless nod to his host, and no glance at Kyle. His air of indifference might have appeared an affectation, had his eyes not been so

dull. The flush of anger had gone from his face, leaving him pale. As he walked slowly away to the group of which the art critic was the centre, Kyle noticed that what he had taken for a limp was a slight dragging of one foot that was scarcely apparent. He had changed greatly in the last three years, but Kyle was forced to grant that of the twelve men present Rutledge Ericson was by far the most noticeable; he possessed beauty—beauty of feature—and distinction of carriage; he was as tall as Kyle himself and more slender. Seen at his side Kyle appeared a plain man with little to recommend him but his height and look of unusual strength. The sight of him was acutely painful to Kyle; he had not realized that it could hurt him as it did. It stirred ugly passions in him that no will power of his could immediately conquer. Kyle had come with hurt feelings and nerves strained by anxiety, and now anger, a hot resentment against unalterable circumstances, sickened him. He would not have touched Rutledge Ericson's hand for any consideration; it had been a physical impossibility.

Floyd-Kaufman's eyes followed Rutledge's lagging movements. "I shouldn't be surprised if they were already married, and his mother none the wiser," he remarked.

"Married?" Kyle said.

"Yes; he and Aleksandra. The report was that he followed her to London and asked her to marry him—one of his wildest infatuations apparently. Margaret says that Maud was terrified—she told you about it the other night at the theatre. It was all true. Maud dropped everything and flew after him to London. What happened there none of us know, except that Rutledge went on the wildest spree in his record. He kept it up for weeks with Maud at his elbow, and Aleksandra fascinating London as she has New York. Then she went back to Paris and the Ericsons followed immediately. Rutledge watched Aleksandra dance night after night, but

they were never seen together—they succeeded in keeping secret their little affair. Paris was talking, our set was talking here, but everything was surmise. Then Aleksandra comes to us. She has only been here a few days when Maud appears, dusts her house, and gives out that Rutledge is going to remain in Paris, but she intends to spend the winter here. Two or three days later Rutledge walks in upon us as calmly as if expected.

“A surprise to Mrs. Ericson?” Kyle asked.

“*Rather!* You saw her at my party on Tuesday? Well, Wednesday night we were at Maud’s, a bridge dinner, had just settled down to play, and in came Rutledge. He came up behind his mother’s chair, and we none of us saw him until he spoke. ‘Hello, mother!’ he said, and Maud whirled around on him as if the devil was behind her. I’ve known her for a good many years, but I’ve never seen her look as she did then. She was like chalk; she hadn’t an atom of nerve left. The next minute she was decently surprised and all the rest of it, but we had seen her face; there was no going back of that. Rutledge was composure itself, and I knew in a moment that he was pretty well fortified against the cold—as he is to-night. I learned last autumn in Paris to know the look of him when he’s in that condition. Didn’t you notice to-night? He gets white, and his eye as dull as a cod’s.”

“He has changed a great deal.”

“He has that. He reminded me of his father the other night. He had questions enough to answer in five minutes’ time, but he was as cool as he is now. He couldn’t bear to be left alone—he missed his mother, he said, and Maud looked sick while she laughed with the rest of us. It was the only reason he would give. But the thing is plain enough for all of us to see. Rutledge is in earnest for once and Maud is at her wits’ end. She came hurrying over here to buy

Aleksandra off, stop the affair if possible, at any rate to be on the ground as soon as Rutledge. It will be fun to see who wins out." Floyd-Kaufman's manner expressed relish.

"Does it matter particularly?" Kyle remarked, dryly.

Floyd-Kaufman laughed. "Not to you, perhaps, but it does to the rest of us—and certainly to Maud. Rutledge and his doings have been nuts to us for a long time—we no sooner crack one than there is another presented to us."

"He appears to be lame," Kyle forced himself to continue.

"Yes, rheumatism, and it was bad enough to keep him at the baths part of the summer; but, Lord, it was a lively invalid he was! . . . You know, Kyle, it's a shame the way he is going, and Maud taking it all calmly. It's drink that's the main trouble, and women of course. He'll end in an asylum one of these days. Just look at him now—and he's not twenty-six!"

Rutledge had found another high-backed chair to lean upon, and was giving negligent attention to the gesticulating Frenchman. The group stood before "The Field of Iris," and the artist's joke had set them all laughing, all but Rutledge. He looked before him, his mouth fallen into hard lines, every vestige of youth gone from his face. His forehead appeared ridged, the puffs under his eyes apparent.

"Gad, I'm glad he's not my son!" Floyd-Kaufman ejaculated.

"You are congratulating yourself too early—your son is only ten," Kyle returned, in the dry tone that was the only outlet he allowed his smouldering anger and disgust. His eyes left his host's for a brief survey of the room that was more expressive than words. "Let him imbibe some years of 'atmosphere,' run about with a few of the Rutledge Ericsons, or your group of esthetes over there, before you become congratulatory. It's early days yet, Floyd."

The big man looked at him with lowered brows for a

moment, ready for resentment, but he knew from the light in Kyle's eye that he cared not a whit how his remarks were received. Floyd-Kaufman flushed, then shrugged, with hands outspread, a characteristic gesture.

"He must take his chance."

"Doubtless. . . . There is your thirteenth, Floyd."

"At last!" Floyd-Kaufman said, in relief. The look of excitement returned to his face as he turned to greet Wayland Jones, who had stopped for a questioning word with Rutledge Ericson's group. "I had almost given you up, Wayland."

Wayland Jones' voice had its ever-present tinge of sarcasm. "You haven't sprung the mine yet then, Floyd? I grieve to be late. I bolted my dinner as the ostrich does prayer-books and silk handkerchiefs, nevertheless I perceive I am the last."

Kyle had turned to the contemplation of a painting in order to escape further conversation. He had been rude to his host, a rare occurrence with Kyle. He knew that Floyd-Kaufman had understood his meaning perfectly. His survey of the room had conveyed his contemptuous appreciation of a studied simplicity that made more subtle the suggestion of the flesh-bedecked walls. The tiny theatre with its dark hangings and deeply cushioned seats lay just beyond, and there was the possibility of pandering to sensuality in the luxurious apartments across the hall. That Floyd-Kaufman refrained from debauchery Kyle knew perfectly well; had it been otherwise he would not have lent his presence on this occasion or any other. Floyd-Kaufman was a sensationalist who drew the veil of artistry over suggestion, appealing subtly to the unwholesome, soothing jaded senses. He had appraised the hotbed conditions about him, judging correctly of neurotic tendencies, and deliberately set himself to utilize them for his own purpose.

Kyle had often observed the curious duality of the man. He had made himself a figure in the financial world, he

reserved a large half of his practical brain to serve him in the camp of financial marauders, but he craved also to lead in New York's army of esthetes. He avoided their jargon, but perpetually tickled their palates by a skilful presentation of the erotic. Hitherto Kyle had looked with contemptuous tolerance on Floyd-Kaufman's pet amusements, and occasional sensational art débuts, as matters that did not concern him; such vagaries were not infrequent; but to-night he was guarding a smothered rage that found outlet in profound disgust at his surroundings. What wonder that in a murky atmosphere youth became frankly the debauchee or the degenerate! Kyle remembered his own early days in New York. While to a large extent unyielding, had he himself not been infected by the unrest that demands the unusual, that finds the ordinary, the normal, somewhat flat to the taste? Else why was he not now the father of a son, the head of a family such as Mr. Burnham desired for him?

And the girl who held him in her hand? What sort of a future was he proposing to enter upon with her? He stood with his back to the room, his unseeing eyes on a painting, but the stinging consciousness of Rutledge Ericson's presence was with him, turning him hot. He felt a longing for Esther and open country, the clean sweep of the wind, the wide stretch of prairie and the limitless blue of the sky, the wholesome life of his boyhood. He would like to take Esther into that open country, and dwell there with her under a clear sky. He told himself vehemently that it was not the allure of her that he desired most; it was the sweetness, the eternal child that was the heart of her. He longed to take that and hold it, cherish it, give it an opportunity to grow into full bloom. He could bear the hurt of many things for the sake of that one supreme joy.

"Have you found the face of a lost love in that Titian tinted beauty?" Wayland Jones inquired, as he passed behind

Kyle. "The rest of us are about to enter into the Holy of Holies."

Kyle turned with a start to find himself last in the procession that moved into the theatre. He entered just behind Rutledge Ericson, who loitered as if careless whether he went or stayed. The room was a good miniature imitation of the usual theatre parquet. On entering one ascended several steps, the rear of the room being somewhat higher than the stage. The floor sloped to the stage, the seats, that were in reality large adjustable chairs, being placed in three semicircular rows. There was only space for a passage between the foremost row of chairs and the stage, so that to the uninitiated there appeared to be no provision for an orchestra, but those who were acquainted with the arrangement of the room knew that the space for musicians was under the stage. The roof was high and skylighted, the windows set near the ceiling, and the entire room, padded walls, heavily carpeted floor, hangings, and drop curtain, were a blood red. The room was richly lighted when they entered, and several stopped to exclaim over this unexpected display of Floyd-Kaufman's ingenuity. The Chicagoan was the most surprised and enthusiastic.

Kyle sat apart from the others, choosing his seat because it was the one most remote from Rutledge and his group. Rutledge seated himself at first beside Cunanne, but for some reason he chose to move, sauntering over to Kyle's end of the room, and finally taking a seat in the same row, the third from Kyle. He adjusted his chair, lowering it and dropping the back somewhat, then sat sidewise, turned in Kyle's direction, but apparently unconscious of his presence. His indifferent glance passed over Kyle, and rested on Floyd-Kaufman, who was seated on the front row beside John Bascome.

Floyd-Kaufman was turned about, observant of the men

behind him, his look alert and serious. He gave the impression of waiting for silence, and it was immediately accorded him, for in spite of surmise and raillery, every man Floyd-Kaufman had inveigled into the place was at heart keenly curious, and not a little impressed. Each knew that Floyd-Kaufman was no practical joker; he was much too sensible to meditate a hoax, and too tactful to offer a *dénouement* that would offend the taste of such men as John Bascome. Floyd-Kaufman had risked something when he took from his walls every painting that did not contain a nude figure, but he dared disapproval to that extent for the sake of comment; he had been unable to resist that appeal to the sensational. He was also certain that he possessed several masterpieces in the collection that would go far toward winning pardon for the very apparent decadence of the remainder. He rose slowly now, his glance sweeping the observant faces. The silence was tentative. It was Cunanne who called, "Speech!"

Floyd-Kaufman was more than usually blunt. "I have none to make," he said. "I only want to thank you all for coming in spite of doubts and ridiculous statements. I have had every reporter in town call me up during the last three days, and to each one I have promised a correct account of the evening provided they keep quiet until to-morrow. One or two of you I had to drag here,"—his eye fell on Kyle,— "some of you I have endeavored to deceive, but there's not a man of you that I was not particularly anxious to have—that's my excuse. If I have misjudged the quality of the entertainment I propose to offer you, if any one considers I have hoaxed him in persuading him to come, pray tell me before you leave. My intentions have been of the best." Floyd-Kaufman turned to the stage, his voice only slightly raised, "Now, Duprez——"

The room plunged into a darkness that changed almost immediately to a half light, the reflected glow of a footlight

on the red drop-curtain. There was a moment of perfect quiescence, then seen by the indistinct light the curtains parted, showing a dark inner drapery. Some large object clung to the dark background, a gleam of gold, and suddenly, vivified by a stream of light, the object sprang into view. The magnifying light enlarged and brought it so suddenly close that it appeared to have rushed at them, and they stood on the threshold of a strange place: a room of sodden poverty, a tumbled bed, a cot with a shawled bundle upon it guarded by two rickety chairs, an infant's garment trailing on the floor. Broken plaster on the wall, grime marks, shreds of cloth upon the torn carpet, windows crosslined by scaffolding, a miracle of detail almost Dureresque in its perfection, yet in theme vividly modern, sensational, unsoftened. From behind her work-table a woman stared at them, steadily, vacantly, her eyes dull-glazed, her cheeks and temples sunken, the lines in her forehead so deep and regular that they looked as if cut into the flesh by tight drawn cords. She smiled at them with lifted lip, a grin that brought the moisture to the brow of the sensitive. She smiled and still smiled, insistently, over the shoulders of the man who lay across the table. He was clad in fine raiment, she in the dress of poverty. His face was hidden, his part apparent only in the lines of his body, and the clutching hands that lifted to her shoulders. The artist had told his story in those long-fingered grasping hands; they alone had been sufficient to set Paris mad; the woman's face had turned beholders inarticulate.

There was an instant's silence so intense that it was without breath, then the Frenchman's high, thin cry broke upon it.

“Dieu! . . . C'est le Désespoir! Bravo, Pemberton!”

There were others on their feet, a hail of exclamations:

“By the Lord, Floyd——!”

“Pemberton's ‘Despair’——!”

"Where——? How——?"

"Where——?"

"Where did you find it, Floyd-Kaufman? Where did you get it?" It was Willis Cloud's shrill voice, and Christian Aronson's bass drowning the others.

Floyd-Kaufman laughed high. He stood before them, hands in pockets. "That's my secret! I've paid for it, Cloud. . . . Go to it, Aronson; feel of it; it's genuine!"

"Give us the lights, somebody!" Cunanne commanded. In the babble he was for a time unheard.

There were two men whose voices were still, who sat without movement, without stir of muscle, as they had sat when the stream of light had swept that squalid room up to them and bade them look in. On Kyle's brain were hammering certain words, "There was a man who found me—ignorant and in despair. I went with him——" And that was the way of it, and he had dared to give that story to the world—for the eyes of men and women to look upon! Those clutching hands were his—and the gray in his hair. He had dared—he had *dared!* He had laid hands on her when that look lay in her eyes, a child in his grasp, a bird that sought to spread her broken wings over the helpless thing on the cot. The tears swept up in Kyle's throat, and rose to his eyes, blinding him, setting that awful thing on the stage swaying, twisting it about, blurring it. . . . The young man of millions at his side had done his part, and that other had drawn advantage from his handiwork!

Kyle lifted with a jerk, and looked to the right of him. They sat in brighter light now, he and Rutledge Ericson alone. . . . The others had gone to the stage; a group stood before the canvas, loud-voiced, still questioning. Floyd-Kaufman was highly flushed, but collected, a quick retort for every question. . . . Rutledge Ericson sat with his elbow on the arm of his chair, his shoulders hunched as if his spine

refused to hold him upright; Kyle could see only his profile. The hand against his purple cheek was blue-white, and as Kyle looked, he swayed a little. Kyle wondered if Rutledge saw or if his eyes were closed. There had been the will to murder in Kyle's heart, but something in the young man's bent attitude struck cold across his anger, chilling him. Rutledge had looked upon his handiwork and it had turned him very ill, bent him over in physical pain.

"Rutledge, come down here!" Floyd-Kaufman called. "You've been in Paris three years; come answer some of the questions I can't. Come!"

Rutledge rose slowly and stood upright, straightening himself with effort. He stood still for a time, looking steadily at Pemberton's masterpiece, at Esther in her dull red gown fallen apart at the neck, at the cot against the wall. In the effort of rising the blood had left his face; he was gray. Then he turned deliberately, and passed Kyle, making his way between the chairs to the entrance. When Floyd-Kaufman called again he was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

“So Rutledge was too bored to stay, was he? He knows as much of art as the great auk, but he’s learned in the ins and outs of Paris, and I wanted a talk with him—just as I do with you. . . . However——” Floyd-Kaufman spoke thoughtfully, bending to strike a match for his cigarette. He straightened, his head thrown back, puffing vigorously at the bit of flame, then cast the match into the fire. His every gesture spoke the consciousness of triumph; not only that, but the desire to dare further, the wish to extract yet a little more from the opportunity of the moment. He was still flushed, eager-eyed, but cool of tongue. “There’s an abundance of time in which to see him,” he added.

Kyle eyed him gravely. Of Floyd-Kaufman’s guests only Kyle remained. They stood together before the fire in the lounging-room, or boudoir, as it might more appropriately be called in deference to its effeminate appointments of rose and white and gold, cushions, mirrors, and velvet carpet. Its owner looked more than ever like an elephant in oriental trappings, fit adjunct to a durbar.

Kyle answered nothing. He had remained at Floyd-Kaufman’s request, but entirely for reasons of his own. In the half hour that followed upon the heels of that horror in the theatre he had had time to inquire, to consider. He was pale, composed, clear-eyed.

Floyd-Kaufman smoked thoughtfully, standing with legs apart, firmly planted on the white and rose-colored rug; he was looking steadily at a trifle on an inlaid table. Kyle smoked also, still silent and observant. He had seen Floyd-Kaufman once before in exactly the same attitude. It was on an occasion when his answer had changed the entire character

of a great financial case, and four lawyers of ability had watched Allen Floyd-Kaufman thoughtfully eye an ink-stand on a nearby desk. Kyle knew what his next move would be. Floyd-Kaufman took the cigarette from his lips, looked at its lighted tip, then at Kyle.

"Do you know a girl called Bernais?" he inquired, abruptly.

"Miss Bernais? Yes," Kyle returned, his clear eyes meeting Floyd-Kaufman's shrewd glance with one slightly questioning.

"The girl who has a studio just below you on Sixteenth." Floyd-Kaufman still held his cigarette lifted, looking across it at Kyle.

"You mean the young woman who does illustrating? Yes, I know her—she has done some work for me. . . . Why?"

"You know, of course, that she is the original of that thing of Pemberton's."

"Do you think so? . . . There is a likeness—certainly; it's a Russian type; the features might even be Aleksandra's," Kyle returned judicially.

"Aleksandra! Nonsense, Kyle," but there was a note of arrested attention in his curt reply.

"Certainly—why not? One guess is as good as another."

Floyd-Kaufman paused to consider a side issue. "Do you think the likeness occurred to any one but you? I'll grant there is a likeness to Aleksandra, now you point it out."

"I should think it possible; Madame Aleksandra's features are well known. As I said, it's a Russian type, though not a common one—there's an admixture of the oriental that makes it unusual. But why do you think that Miss Bernais was Pemberton's model for that painting? The thing was done in Paris, wasn't it?"

Kyle's manner was frankly questioning, but not unduly

interested. Beneath his controlled exterior he was very angry. Floyd-Kaufman's endeavor to take him by surprise, coupled with his air of assurance, drove Kyle to the limit of patience. Only by sheer force of will could he restrain himself. If Floyd-Kaufman gained any ultimate advantage from that interview, it would be because he, Kyle, was mentally somewhat less agile than usual. If Floyd-Kaufman was numbered among Esther's ill-wishers, Kyle would welcome early notice of the fact.

"It was done here—right here in New York," Floyd-Kaufman answered. "I happen to know its history."

"And that Miss Bernais sat for a grotesquerie like that product of Pemberton's?"

"I have good grounds for my statement," Floyd-Kaufman insisted.

"You must have, certainly, or you wouldn't make it," Kyle replied. "Yet to most people the supposition would appear as ridiculous as mine regarding Madame Aleksandra; the girl in the painting is plainly a girl of the slums." Kyle's manner had a touch of contempt calculated to provoke. "But what is the excitement, Floyd? If by chance Miss Bernais did pose for the 'Despair,' neither of us is responsible—what does it matter?"

Floyd-Kaufman studied Kyle's expression for a moment, and then said seriously enough, "It does matter. . . . What do you know of Miss Bernais, Kyle? I have good reason for asking the question." He had become impressive.

Kyle returned the other man's grave look with one as steady. "I know that she is a quiet, hard-working girl. I have seen something of her during the last few weeks, and I like Miss Bernais. No one could help respecting her."

"And is that all you know of her?" Floyd-Kaufman said, a little scornfully. "What is her history, Kyle?"

Kyle's brows lowered angrily. "May I ask the reason

for all this apparently senseless questioning?" he demanded. "I have no objection whatever to discussing Miss Bernais and her concerns with any friend of hers, but I don't understand your attitude, or what it is that's obsessing you."

Floyd-Kaufman laughed out. "So you have not lived under the same roof for months with a woman who has a face and voice like hers and escaped untouched! I guessed as much. Huh, Kyle!" The deficient breeding of the man, that no cleverness on his part had been sufficient to eradicate, spoke in his raillery.

"Possibly I misunderstand you—but I don't take kindly to impertinence." Kyle faced the other squarely now, the anger he had been controlling sprung into his look; his hands had gone into his pockets for safer keeping.

Floyd-Kaufman's air of assurance changed instantly to the placatory. "You do misunderstand me—I had no intention of insulting you, Kyle. . . . The fact is that I am simply daft over that thing of Pemberton's, and itching to know the truth about it."

"And what possible assistance can I give you? I know nothing whatever about the painting. If there is anything you want of me, pray state it plainly, Floyd; otherwise I shall bid you a pretty prompt good-evening." Kyle had abated but little of his heat, for he knew his man; there was a good deal of the bully in Floyd-Kaufman's composition.

"Oh, come, Kyle," Floyd-Kaufman said, pleasantly. "I had no intention whatever of offending you—you ought to know me well enough for that."

Kyle relaxed. "I certainly thought that I did—but please be explicit. I don't understand what you are driving at, that's all."

"I want the worst way in the world to locate Miss Bernais, and that's the truth," Floyd-Kaufman declared, with a change to frankness. "I thought possibly you might help me."

"I assure you that I cannot. Some one in the house told me yesterday that she was out of town; aside from that I know nothing of her movements." Kyle's expression vouched for his sincerity.

"Thank you, Kyle, for an honest answer," Floyd-Kaufman said, with a full return to his usual blunt manner, "and please don't misunderstand me when I ask you a plain question. You say you know Miss Bernais. Is she straight, or something else?"

"Straight—absolutely. I respect her," Kyle returned, with emphasis.

"She is the original of the girl in Pemberton's painting," Floyd-Kaufman remarked, tentatively.

"So you declared a few minutes ago. You appear to base your conviction merely on a likeness."

"Miss Bernais herself sold me that painting not five days ago," Floyd-Kaufman returned, significantly. He spoke quite as quietly as Kyle, but the blood came into his face, and his eyes had a sudden access of the triumph of the evening.

He had cut the ground from under the other man's feet. Kyle had a sensation as sickening as that of falling through space. His lips said, "You don't say so!"

"I certainly do."

"It seems incredible," Kyle remarked. He was cool enough now, even smiling. "I see why you asked me to stay. I've been wondering ever since I came in here what you were leading up to—you were not satisfied with springing one surprise on me. . . . But how in all reason could the thing have come into her possession?"

"Do you believe now that Pemberton painted Miss Bernais?" There was malice in Floyd-Kaufman's question.

"And did he?"

"The likeness and the fact of her having the painting! Those things speak for themselves."

"It's pretty strong circumstantial evidence," Kyle answered, unmoved, "but it's not proof. Didn't she tell you how she came by the painting—give you any explanation?"

Floyd-Kaufman hesitated. "No—she refused to say a word."

"Why, I wonder? But you didn't buy it without assurance that she owned it? You are not the man for that, Floyd."

"Of course not. She had a perfectly authentic statement of sale."

"She had actually bought it then?"

"Apparently—the bill of sale stated 'for a consideration agreed upon.'"

"Well," Kyle said, thoughtfully, "the natural conclusion would be that she did buy it—you have no proof that she did not. It's surprising enough, the whole thing, but as long as you have the painting and have scored a hit with it, the rest is of little importance. I congratulate you on a clever bit of work, Floyd; the papers will be full of it to-morrow."

"Yes, and if we could have gotten an interview out of Miss Bernais it would have been twice as effective," Floyd-Kaufman said, with ill-concealed annoyance.

"We?"

"Cunanne and I. I didn't dare question her before I secured the thing, for fear of sending her to Cloud or some one else. She knew the value of that painting perfectly, Kyle, and she made a close bargain with me. She knew what I had bid for it originally, and she made me pay for my triumph of to-night as well. She was absolutely cool. I tell you, Kyle, I went down before her!" Either purposely or otherwise Floyd-Kaufman warmed to his subject. "You see, Kyle, my interest in the painting goes back to a full year before it was exhibited in Paris. It was begun here in New York three years ago, and I was the only person Pemberton

showed it to, and that was only because I knew more than any one else about the circumstances that led up to his painting it. I wanted the thing from the beginning, and tried to bargain with him for it, but he only laughed at me. You knew Pemberton—he lived below you at one time—had Miss Bernais' studio, which is a singular coincidence." Floyd-Kaufman smiled slightly. "However, Pemberton carried his painting off to Paris, but he did not exhibit it for months. You know the history of the painting after it was hung, of course—until it disappeared?"

"I knew that it created a stir, and your voluble Frenchman told me this evening that you, Cloud, Aronson, and several others had tried to get it from Pemberton, but that he had refused every offer and taken it back to his studio. Then it was reported to have been sold privately, and Pemberton declined to give any information regarding it; there was a report that he had destroyed it, but what had really become of it was a mystery. Evidently, Miss Bernais was the purchaser."

Floyd-Kaufman paid no attention to Kyle's last remark. "You knew Pemberton pretty well, didn't you, Kyle?"

"Fairly." Kyle was not finding the moment easy.

"He was a queer devil. He used to come up here a good deal, and we had some great jaunts together, for he was always scouring the city for material. An idea had possession of him, and he wanted a face to fit his conception. He would turn over every bit of refuse in the city, or haunt upper Fifth Avenue; it was all the same to him, he was out on a man hunt. He was going back to Paris and he had not found his 'Despair.' You've heard him on the subject: London was too sodden, Paris too theatrical; he wanted to find it here, but the place was barren, barren, and he must be off in two days. I gave a farewell supper for him, and after every one else had gone he stayed on, talking, talking and fussing,

restless and miserable. He went on and on until out came the truth. He hadn't painted a stroke for months; he had his idea and couldn't put it on canvas; he couldn't find the face he wanted—everything failed him. He looked haggard, and old, and desperate. 'I won't be beaten,' he said, at last. 'I'll go at it again to-night—I've only two more nights,' and I offered my company. . . . Gad, Kyle, I thought I knew this place, but I found I was an unsophisticated maiden. We had looked at 'Despair' enough to stock a gallery, I thought, but Pemberton dismissed it with a glance. At four o'clock in the morning I gave out. 'I've had enough,' I said. 'I'm going home.' 'Very well, go,' he answered. 'I'm just beginning to wake up. I shall do the parks at daylight,' and we parted company. A week later I met him. 'I thought you were on the Atlantic,' I exclaimed, and he laughed. 'No; I found my "Despair" after all. Come along with me,' he said, and he took me to his studio and showed me that painting in there. It was in the rough, but the girl's face was there, just as it is now.

"'You certainly have found it,' I remarked, and he said, 'Of a surety I have.'

"'I'll buy it of you,' I offered, and he laughed at me. 'We'll wait a little,' he said.

"'Where did you find her?' I asked, and he laughed at me again. 'You dropped out too early in the race,' he taunted. It was all I got from him. Two days later I saw that he had sailed. But I meant to have the painting. I wrote to him about it twice, and never a word from him. Two months later I was in Paris and tried to find him. He had hidden himself somewhere in Southern France, and it was not until a year later that the 'Despair' was hung. I tried for it, Cloud was mad for it, Aronson smelt the shekels, but Pemberton refused every one of us. He was sitting around his studio, doing nothing. He told me he had not

touched a brush for months, that he was sick to death, and he looked it. He looked like an old tiger that is almost done, too weak even to snarl, but he refused us the 'Despair.' It was weeks afterwards that we heard it had been sold, at any rate it had disappeared, but when Pemberton died he left barely enough to bury him and pay his debts. . . . You see, Kyle, that I had some reason for my interest in the 'Despair.'" Floyd-Kaufman had gone on casually, his cigarette sometimes at his lips, sometimes in his lifted hand, his eyes only occasionally on Kyle's attentive face.

"Yes—and you think that it was Miss Bernais Pemberton found, and in the surroundings he painted?" Kyle asked, quietly.

"The supposition is possible, isn't it?"

"Certainly."

"I think too," Floyd-Kaufman continued, "that the original of the 'Despair' became something more to Pemberton than merely a model. As I have met Miss Bernais, and am something of a judge, I can also imagine subsequent history. At any rate, the 'Despair' came back to her finally, and under the circumstances it appears to me that she had the best possible right to it. Probably the idea occurred to Pemberton in those last days when he gloomed around his studio. He was not the kind to whom dying would be pleasant—not any more than it will be to me when my time comes."

Kyle smiled. "I see that you have worked out a theory. All things are possible to an imagination as active as yours. You have at least succeeded in giving your 'Despair' sufficient atmosphere."

"I think my theory would read well, even if frankly given as conjecture, don't you? Cunanne is good at that sort of thing."

Floyd-Kaufman's air was reflective, but Kyle realized as he had from the beginning of the conversation that Floyd-

Kaufman had a double purpose in baiting him. He wanted first of all to learn all he could of Esther; she had touched the quick of interest in him; that was patent to Kyle's watchful jealousy. Floyd-Kaufman's shrewdness was sufficient to apprise him of an equal interest on Kyle's part and he had attempted to discover the nature of the interest, whether Kyle was loyal to Esther or not, and having satisfied himself on that score had endeavored, under an appearance of frankness, to make Kyle wince. Kyle's careless disapproval of Floyd-Kaufman's peculiar foibles had been noted and resented by Floyd-Kaufman. It had not affected their business relations in the least; Floyd-Kaufman had need of Kyle's ability, and self-interest was his first law, but if in a private matter and acting under the appearance of frankness he could touch Kyle on a sensitive point it would afford him some satisfaction. Kyle had always recognized a feminine element in Floyd-Kaufman, the quality that made him crave the sort of cushioned frippery that surrounded them. He possessed the 'Despair,' and the inquisitive in him, combined with love of power, made him desire to lay a finger on Esther as well. Whether merely to use her for the further exploiting of his recent purchase or because of a more personal interest, Kyle could not determine. Kyle's jealous guarding of Esther inclined him to the latter belief. He could well imagine that a single interview with Esther would be sufficient to arouse Floyd-Kaufman's interest. It was he, then, and Cunanne, who had plied the janitor. Kyle had mentally set his teeth when he had asked himself why Esther had been driven to do so wild a thing as to bring this sort of notice upon herself. Had she been so desperate for money, and yet declined his help?

"It would be a readable story doubtless," Kyle agreed, "though it might verge on the libellous. It would certainly be an anti-climax to your surprise this evening, too much so

to be effective; but, Floyd—if I may ask the question every one else has put to you to-night—just how did you secure the painting? How did you know that Miss Bernais had it?”

“I told you. She offered it to me. She came to my office to do it—last Monday morning. She was brief enough in what she had to say: she owned Pemberton’s ‘Despair’ and was willing to sell it. She gave me the whole thing in a sentence or two; she declined even to sit down, for if I did not want it she would offer it to Mr. Willis Cloud, or Mr. Aronson—she knew they had wanted the painting when it was exhibited. You would have thought from her manner that she had matches for sale. I had something of a turn, for even in a hat and veil I felt sure that she was the original of the ‘Despair.’ Of course I said that I must see the painting, and be assured of her legal right to it, and she said, ‘But certainly.’ She gave me her address, and advised me to come that morning; she would be at home in an hour. I went promptly and found her in that old, bare studio of Pemberton’s, below you. She was without her veil then and I was certain.

“She showed me her papers first, and they were perfectly correct—I knew Pemberton’s signature; she owned the ‘Despair,’ and in two minutes I had calculated how she came to be possessed of it. It was stretched and loosely wrapped, held against the wall by her bed! Gad, it gave me the shivers when I saw it! She might have put her foot through it any night, with just one movement. We stood it up against the wall in full view and I stared at it. She sat on the couch and looked up at the skylight, or across at the window, for it was raining hard, but I noticed that she never once glanced at the thing I was looking at. Her likeness to the girl in the picture was plain enough—she had the same look without the smile.”

“‘It is really Pemberton’s “Despair,”’ I said, and she answered, ‘But certainly.’

“I was succinct—I knew I had to be. ‘What do you ask for it?’ I inquired.

“She stated her price briefly enough—she had added one-fourth to my original offer. ‘That is more than has ever been offered for it,’ I said. ‘It is more than I am willing to pay.’

“She got up from her couch. ‘That is of course for you to choose. I will take no less for there are others who will pay.’ I was dismissed. I tried to bargain, but she stopped me. ‘You waste my time,’ she said. ‘Before to-night I shall sell it,’ and I knew that she could, though possibly not at that figure. It was worth that to me, everything taken into consideration, and before night she had her price and I owned the ‘Despair.’”

“And she refused to answer questions, or give explanations?” Kyle had flushed deeply during the recital.

Floyd-Kaufman’s face had darkened also. “Did she refuse to explain? Yes, quite as determinedly as she conducted the sale of her painting! I admire nerve in man or woman—and she possesses it. When I tried to see her again she had removed herself. . . . I confess, Kyle, that I thought at first you might know something of her whereabouts, but of course you don’t. I guessed of course that you knew her; you couldn’t help it, a woman like that at your very door! But she will appear sooner or later.” Floyd-Kaufman was thoughtful. “My discovery of the painting can very effectively remain a mystery—for a short time—but after that there’ll have to be an explanation. Every painting must have a history; when one sells a painting, the history is supposed to go with it. . . . Miss Bernais can’t avert it by running away, but I certainly should respect her wishes if she expressed them to me. She need not have thought it necessary to run away from me.”

Kyle was very white, and his hands had gone into his pockets again. To speak angrily to the man before him would be no way to help Esther. "I should think that cheap notoriety of the sort you suggest would be poor advertisement for your painting, Floyd," Kyle said, gravely. "I have never admired Pemberton's work, but even I will grant that it is worthy of better handling than you propose to give it. I can't see that it demands an explanation. If it is art at all it deserves dignified treatment, and to-night you went just about as far in the exploiting of its sensational quality as the subject will stand; a little more and you will make a joke of a painting that has real dramatic merit. . . . And as for Miss Bernais—I judge that she will be perfectly capable of looking after her own interests, but in case she needs help, I dare say she will have very little difficulty in finding it; able help if she wants it," Kyle's voice had gained edge. "In reality, Floyd, most men hate sensationalism, and despise an act that verges on the caddish. A woman is a good deal quicker to stir up a nasty mess about a man than a man is about a woman—a woman is lacking in the sense of proportion, for one thing, and a man's common sense, if nothing else, usually intervenes and saves the day. Above all things he hates to be thought little and mean."

Floyd-Kaufman had grown scarlet. "All that's true enough, and I agree perfectly with your arguments, but murder will out, Kyle, and Miss Bernais has taken a pretty big risk. The sudden unearthing of a thing as striking as that production of Pemberton's will *demand* an explanation, and if one is not given there will be one fabricated; there are always those who will do it for you—and in spite of you."

"It's a contingency, Floyd, and I think too well of both you and Cunanne not to know that you will handle it well if it becomes necessary. Neither of you has any quarrel with a woman—that's out of the question—and no man of your

instincts would even indirectly smirch a woman without awfully urgent reasons, and pretty clear proof. . . . But we've talked until the small hours, and I must be off."

Floyd-Kaufman was still flushed. "Here, take a cigar with you," he urged.

"Thank you," Kyle said. "Did you ever know me to refuse your brand?"

In his struggle with Floyd-Kaufman Kyle had counted upon one thing: he knew that he and the men who were his friends had Floyd-Kaufman's respect, and that the man who sought to climb and distrusted his own ability would be slow to offend those whose admiration he craved.

So Kyle stood for a time talking of other matters and when Floyd-Kaufman went with him to the door he did a thing that was still more difficult to him—he returned his host's cordial hand-shake with one as cordial. Why make an enemy for Esther? She had brought difficulties enough upon herself. How could she hurt him as she had that night? Why did she deliberately choose to make it as hard as possible for him to guard her? . . . If he might again see beneath her door the line of light that he had watched for weeks, his distress of mind might be soothed.

CHAPTER XIX

KYLE'S wish was unexpectedly granted. For weeks he had never once climbed the stairs of his house or mounted in the elevator that he did not look down the passage to Esther's room. In these last days of suspense he had knocked often at her door, and the telephone on his table had also served him, but every attempt had met with silence. To-night, on his return from Floyd-Kaufman's, he stopped to look as usual, and the dimness of the passage was relieved by the wished-for line of light. As Kyle watched it was partially blotted out, then shone clear again; some one moved to and fro within. Kyle jerked at his watch. It was one o'clock, and, warned by a former occasion when he had acted suddenly and been made to suffer, he curbed impulse and went on, for the telephone was a possibility.

His call was answered instantly, a breathless, "Yes," so changed from Esther's usual voice that Kyle scarcely recognized it.

"Esther, it is Robert Kyle," he returned, his own words somewhat inarticulate.

"Ach, Mr. Kyle." Esther's soft accent came to him in a quick-drawn breath of relief.

"I startled you, Esther? . . . I am just in, and it is very late, but I had to know if it was you."

"Yes—I have been back since evening. I called you to tell you, but you were away."

"Did you? . . . I would rather have had your message than food and drink—these fearful days! You left me without a word——"

Esther interrupted. "Mr. Kyle, I have written you a letter—it must lie beside you on the desk. I told the black woman to put it where you would see it when you came in. It will explain. I think you will want to come to-morrow. It is very late to talk, even by the telephone, now, so I say good-night."

"May I come in the morning, Esther?"

"When you wish—in the morning I shall be here—so good-night, Mr. Kyle."

"Good-night, Esther."

She had dealt briefly with him, warned perhaps by the note in his voice that was beyond control. And the letter? He looked for it and found it on his writing pad, almost under his elbow. It was the same minute, irregular hand he remembered so well. What had she written him?

"DEAR MR. KYLE:

"I have just come back and the black woman has told me over the telephone that you are not at home, and also she has confessed that she forgot to give you my note on Tuesday afternoon. When I left to be away for several days I gave it to her with instructions to deliver it to you on your return that evening. She forgot, and mislaid it, so you must have been in anxiety for three long days, not knowing where I was, or why I went. Ah, Mr. Kyle, I am so very sorry—I bring you only always trouble, and still more trouble.

"I have been these three days with my little girl at the convent, Mr. Kyle, and have had time to collect myself, and now I must explain some things that I had not the strength or courage to speak of the other evening when you told me you loved me. First of all I must tell you that I had no conception that you loved me—it was to me an entire surprise—as if the sky had fallen upon me. Had I dreamed that you had at all that feeling to me I should not have let you come here so often, and I would never have come to your room as I did. Even when I was a little beside myself as I was that night, I think I would have succeeded in keeping better control of myself. If I had suspected for one little minute that you loved me I should have acted differently—I should have done so for your sake. But it is not of that I want to write. Those are

things I must speak about when you come to see me—I know you will demand it.

“Mr. Kyle, for two years I have lived so that the work of one day barely paid for the expense of the next day. I had not only myself to provide for, but my little girl as well. I could not leave her with charity children. I must, if it was in my power, give her better surroundings than that, but to do so drove me every moment. Sometimes I went hungry, sometimes I was cold. If my strength flagged I was feverish with terror; when night came I could not sleep for thinking that in the morning I would not have power to go on—it has been like that for two years. Of late weeks it has been worse, for I have been very unhappy—but it is not necessary to write that; I must go on to other things.

“Last Sunday night, late, they telephoned to me from the convent, saying that Mrs. Ericson had been there questioning about my little girl, and about me, speaking as if she had the right to take Felice away. Mr. Kyle, I never hear this telephone ring that I am not faint with terror—I have it here only that I may have instant word if Felice is not well or some harm threatens her, and now such word as that! I sat here burning and sick with fright all night, considering what to do. It had been a relief to me during these two years that Mrs. Ericson remained in Europe, for I think she hated me bitterly. I think she hoped I was dead or something very much worse, and now by some means she had discovered me and Felice. I did not know what evil she might be planning now, for she is a terrible creature. She is not a woman; I do not know what she is; there is no name for such as she. But what was there I could do now? To struggle with Mrs. Ericson I *must* have money; not a few dollars that I might be able to beg from some one, but enough to take both Felice and myself away, if necessary, or enough to make it possible for me to face her bodily. I sat here under my skylight, and shivered and burned, all Sunday night, and finally brought myself to a decision. I had one valuable possession. It was a dying gift to me. It was a thing I kept hidden because it had associations that were terrible, but now I could see no way but to sell it—immediately—and get as much for it as possible. It would make me independent for some time, give me the courage that money gives. Again in my life I was beside myself with terror. I force myself now to tell you something for which I had not courage the other night. The man who found me when I was in despair and took us with him to France was Marc Pemberton.

He painted me as he found me in the slums, a terrified thing that it makes one weep to see, but it is a portrait, the exact truth, even to the bits of thread on the floor. He called it *Désespoir*. He never sold it and when he was dying he sent it to me.

"It was white daylight when I decided, and I went first to the convent and explained enough to make them keep Felice from Mrs. Ericson. Then I found the man who I thought would pay most, a Mr. Floyd-Kaufman, who had wanted it in Paris, and I sold my possession. By night the money was in my hand. The thing was done. Then another agony began. I had declined your help and done a thing that if you ever came to know you would think *fearful*. I ran a risk of all my history being known—I would lose your friendship—I would have to go away—for the sake of Felice I should have to go away—if things became impossible. I walked up and down here—up and down—I was in *agony*.

"Mr. Kyle, you had offered me help. Please do not think that in those hours when I sat here considering I forgot it. *I could not come to you for help*. As you are not a woman I think you will not altogether understand. A man may confess many things—they are the misdeeds of a man, therefore to be palliated, forgiven. For a woman to confess the very same things is like tearing out her heart. You had offered me help, if I came to you and told you my difficulties you would give me money—I knew it—yet *I could not come*. I respected you beyond anything, the knowledge that you thought well of me, that you liked to come and talk to me, that you enjoyed spending your time that was so precious, hours of it, here in this poor, bare room, was a wonderful thing to me, and all *in spite* of what the little gray man, Mr. Burnham, had told you. It had intoxicated me, that joy—I have had so little few minutes of happiness in my life. If I went to you I would have either to speak falsely, or tell you things that I could not bear to speak of, and that would change your opinion of me. Your good opinion was too dear to me—I could not do it. So I hurried and did a strange thing that now you love me will hurt you fearfully. Even while you held my hands and said that you loved me, I remembered that that very day I had done still another thing that should put me out of your life. It helped me to refuse what you offered.

"Another thing I must write of is Mrs. Rieloff. It was she whom you met in the hall. I did not tell you the other night who she was. While I was still walking up and down in my misery she came. Mr. Burnham must have told you somewhat of her. She

began as a servant, and I think has never done much that was right. Mr. Rieloff hired her as his nurse, and because she stole papers of his and terrified him he consented to marry her. Those papers were of importance to Mrs. Ericson, and Mrs. Rieloff sold them to her. My troubles made for her only an excuse to approach Mrs. Ericson. But Mrs. Rieloff has the folly of a servant, as well as being a bad woman. She came here with the money she had extorted from Mrs. Ericson, and very soon men who were more acute than she succeeded in robbing her of it, and she has sunk until she is upon the street. She has become, as you must have seen, just only wreckage. I have seen her three times since I left River Road. A year ago I met her on the street, gaily dressed, and was relieved when she passed me as if I did not exist. Then two months ago, just before I met you, she followed me home one night from the theatre—her money was gone and she was desperate. She wanted me to join with her against the Ericsons in threatening them, and though I feared her terribly, I led her on to talk until she told me a whole long history that I had known since I was a child. Mr. Rieloff had told it to me, frequently, but always without mentioning names. It is a history I will repeat to no one—I wish never to speak of it to you even—it is best buried—I do not forget that Felice is of that family. I ordered Mrs. Rieloff from my sight, I would have nothing to do with such things, but Mrs. Ericson's motives were at last made plain to me.

“On Monday night Mrs. Rieloff came to me again. She was in a state of terror, desperate for a little money with which to get away from this place. She told me that she had a short time ago written to Mrs. Ericson demanding more money of her, and then a few days later when she was not herself—for she takes some drug continually—she had written to Rutledge Ericson also, and now she was in deadly fear, for she had sold all the proof she had to Mrs. Ericson, and even if Mrs. Ericson feared to send her to prison Rutledge would do so. She said he had known nothing about all that long history, and nothing about the papers Mrs. Ericson had bought—all that was between Mrs. Ericson and herself. Now that he knew he would certainly demand proof of her. Mrs. Ericson was already here, and even if he did not come Rutledge would set the law upon her. She was afraid to go near Mrs. Ericson; she only begged and pleaded with me for money enough to get away. She wept and crept on her knees to me, begging for just a few dollars. She has lived so ill she has a horror of the law. I fear her not

at all, but the sight of her fills me with such anger and disgust that it is more than I can endure. I felt it was better for her to go. I had for the first time in three years a sum of money, and I gave her enough to go away and die elsewhere, for she is a very sick woman. I think the end is not far for her, and she knows it.

"She left my door, and I had scarcely closed it when you came and called to me. You know how you found me. I was beside myself. Mrs. Ericson here, her son possibly coming, that terrible woman running to hide herself, my own wretchedness of these last weeks, and then your voice demanding to know why such a woman entered my door. You know how I spoke to you. After I had driven you away I forgot everything except that I had been unjust to the only real friend I had, and I crept up to you for pardon—and you forgave me, and then you said you loved me. In my amazement and my confusion I knew only one thing: I must make you understand that what you asked was *impossible*. You laid me on the rack, but I answered you truthfully, and when you let me go I had no strength to tell you all these things I have written. I wanted only to lie down, and cover my head until I gathered together courage enough to go on. During these three days with Felice I have collected myself so I could write to you, for these are things I do not want to talk about. I have told you everything but one, and when you come to me to-morrow I shall tell you that. My strength shall not fail me again. I wish for you only all that is best in this world.

"ESTHER.

"Mr. Kyle, I have opened my mail now and I find a wonderful thing. There is a letter from a firm of lawyers in Baltimore, and they tell me Mr. Rieloff has placed money in their hands for me—a sum to be paid me every month for a year. He must be better in his mind, and have remembered me, the good old man who was so kind to a little child. He is poor, Mr. Kyle, and yet his gift is very generous. There is then one other person in the world beside yourself who loves me. If I had only known—if I had *only* known—just a few little days earlier, then the thing I sold would still be hidden. Most of my life I must spend in being sorry for the things I have done on impulse and without judgment."

Kyle read the letter once, then re-read it, and read it over again. Most of what Esther told him he already knew;

his interest was not with her explanations. Mrs. Rieloff, Mrs. Ericson, Floyd-Kaufman, he could cope with them all; what he wanted to find was the note of response to his love. He thought it lay in certain expressions, ill-concealed, but determined resistance was more plainly expressed. "My strength shall not fail me again," and "the one thing" which she reserved for speech? Was it to be a struggle between them then, his will against hers? His conception of what was best for him opposed to hers? How would she meet him in the morning?

She met him shyly, braced for effort, but timid. Kyle saw that at first glance, and his alert senses also read pleasure in the moment's steady look she gave him, but beneath it there was inflexibility, a something more decided than the distressed evasion that had been her attitude at their last meeting. It showed itself in the withdrawal of her hands, and the dropping of her eyes, the expression that always made her remote, aloof. He must go carefully, control impatience, but the combative in him was in arms.

While he held her hands and looked into her eyes she said, "All night I have been sorry for these days of anxiety you must have had, Mr. Kyle. I would not have had you suffer so for anything!"

"Never mind, Esther, it's past now, both your anxiety and mine, I hope. You did remember me, that's the important thing, and now you have come back to give me my answer." He expressed his determination at once, for the watchful in him had grown more thoroughly alarmed with each moment.

Esther turned away from him. "Yes," she said, very low, and then a little more clearly, "Let us come to the fire—for a little few minutes. See, for the first time I have made one—in your honor. Since Mr. Rieloff's generosity I am

extravagant." She refused to look at him now, but under her momentary evasion there was firmness.

"No; let us sit under your skylight," Kyle said, quietly. "You have considered and decided other things here—let us choose it now. I can't wait, or talk about other things—I don't want to talk about your letter. What do those things matter to me? I want my answer first. . . . Come here and sit down."

She gave him a swift glance, a lift and lowering of her lashes, then obeyed him without a word, sitting very still, her agitation betraying itself only in the vivid spots of color in her cheeks and the restless movements of her fingers. Kyle sat down beside her, bending slightly that he might see her face better. He did not offer even to touch her hand, for it was a moment too vital to him to suggest a caress.

"Will you be more honest with me than you were the other night?" he asked, and Esther lifted her eyes to him, the deep lines indenting themselves in her forehead.

"I will be entirely so—even if it is difficult."

"I'm not asking if you love me," Kyle said, "because I don't need to. For three wretched days I have been uncertain, but after I read your letter last night I felt you did love me—I don't know just why, but I am certain."

She made him no answer, and he went on.

"If I urge you to say whether you do or not, you will answer me somewhat as you did the other night—you love me—with a reservation. That's what it amounted to. Just what that is I think you mean to tell me to-day. I am in deadly earnest, Esther, and so are you, though you're frightened and suffering because you don't want to hurt me. You promised me honesty, and if you love me be kind to me also. I'm asking you again what I asked the other night—will you marry me, come and make a home for me, and let me help you to forget things that are painful? Will you let me

take care of you, guard you, you and your child, to the best of my ability? . . . Esther, I am offering you all the love there is in me."

He waited a few moments, his eyes on her parted lips, until she found voice for words. "Mr. Kyle, I cannot."

"I expected you to say that," he returned, even more quietly. "But why, Esther? I want an adequate reason to combat. You needn't recount your objections of the other evening—I won't listen to them. They are vital to no one but myself, and I have given you the best possible proof that weighed against your love they cease to exist. Esther, understand me—why it is I love you as I do—I want the truth, the sweetness, the real goodness that is the heart of you. I want the things that others—because of their own defects—were incapable of seeing in you. They saw in you only the highest completion of their own selfish wishes. God knows, you possess that quality that answers to our craving—it was given to you as your birthright—you are simply, undilutedly, warmly feminine, and because you are you have the heart of the girl-child, its weakness as well as its strength. You may not reason adequately, but you can feel much and very correctly. . . . It's that heart of you that I want for my own, dear, and if you love me there is no reason you have given that is sufficient to withhold you from me."

Esther's head had dropped, and she listened, sitting still, only her breast rising and falling. Kyle's voice had grown harsh in its intense earnestness, but when he stopped she did not move, and bending closer he saw her eyelids reddened by the tears that swam beneath her lashes.

"Put your arms about my neck, child," he whispered. "You have wept enough in the past," but she sat on, motionless, and he could endure it no longer. "Is it necessary to hurt me like this?" he demanded.

"Why didn't you come to me when I was a little girl?"

she answered at last, strangling over the words. "But—now——"

"I am begging you to forget," he returned, gentle again on the instant. "Put all that behind you, dear, and answer me from your heart. . . . Esther, every atom of me wants you."

She held him off with a trembling hand, her face burning, scarlet. "Ach, Mr. Kyle, you speak as you would to a man—you urge the thing that is quite possible to a man! It is a thing I *cannot* do to you. Do you not see that if I loved you with all the strength I have, the thing you ask would be only the more impossible to me? To bring my misdeeds and lay them on your shoulders!"

"Your reasons of the other night!" Kyle exclaimed. "Nothing is impossible if you love me—if you really love me you will come here, now, into my arms."

"You judge wrongly of real love then," Esther said, with passionate intensity. "Do you think I fail to judge you rightly? You are a man who can suffer keenly for the sake of one you love. If I let you take me, do with me as you wish, what shame would not the future have for you? My history is as certain to become public as that you are here beside me. I have lived for two years, and must go on living, knowing that at any moment I might have it said of me that I was—was ruined by one man, and became the mistress of another. . . . Forgive me, but you *must* see as I do, and I can only make you see by hurting you—and myself—terribly. The world takes no account of the qualities you say you wish for your own—your loving opinion of me. You wish an impossible thing. You wish to hide me away when I am your wife, because you dread both for myself and for you the pain of exposure, but exposure would come in the end. . . . Do you not *see* how it would be?"

"I should suffer, how could I help it?" Kyle said, with

difficulty. "But the joy of having you for my own would make the other a small thing. My roof and the woman it sheltered would be my own. You and yours would be *mine*."

She turned her face away from him. "Ah, no. . . . Another man could point and say that you sheltered his child. He could point at me—his mother would not hesitate even if he were incapable. . . . Could you endure it without denial, that pointing at your wife—one who might also be the mother of your child?"

"Esther! . . . How can you!" Kyle said, through his teeth.

She shivered. "Because it is true—not because it makes me happy."

"Love can find a way around such difficulties," Kyle said, very low. "There is something left untold." He put his hand beneath her chin, lifting her face to him. "Esther, answer me, dear—do you love me, or do you not? I have asked you again and again, now I want my answer."

Even her lips were white, but she met his look bravely.

"If I have been slow to answer you, and have tried to persuade you by other means, it is because to hurt you is harder than to kill myself. The other night I could not say it to you. . . . Mr. Kyle, if you think a little—put yourself in my place—you will remember, you will possibly understand—"

"What do you mean?"

"If he comes back to me—if he wishes me and his child." She spoke heavily.

He looked at her, frowning, puzzled, a moment of entire incomprehension. Then his hand fell from her, and he sat for a time motionless and speechless. When he rose it was slowly, as if he was still uncertain.

"You don't mean that you still love *him*—Rutledge Ericson?" His manner was subdued, somewhat vague.

"I do not know how I feel to him."

"That is no answer," Kyle said, still in a low voice.

"It is all in the world I can tell you—I do not know how I feel to him."

"You mean after all he has—you mean you will go to him if he wants you?"

"I think that I would." She brought herself to look up at him. "I feel certain that some time he will come. . . . You see, Mr. Kyle, to me—he is my husband."

Kyle stared at her. "Why—you must still love him," he said, in a tone of absolute bewilderment that dropped almost to a whisper on the next words. "Why—I never thought that for a moment!" He turned about and walked a little uncertainly to the fire, and looked at it for a time. "No—but like a woman," he said then, and walked on to the window. Through the rain-specked glass the bricks that edged the coping of the roof opposite were blurred and wavering.

Esther leaned forward and watched him, one hand on her lips, as if by its pressure she restrained words, or a cry that had risen in her throat. Her other hand held the couch gripped, a clinging to some object in her struggle against the force that sought to lift her and carry her to his side. She continued to watch him as he stood. His back was toward her, his legs apart, his head held high. Presently he turned, walking up and down at his end of the room, and Esther still watched in silence.

After a longer time he came back to her, his hands in his pockets. He was very pale, but otherwise he appeared as usual.

"Is that 'the one other thing' you meant to tell me to-day?" he asked.

She nodded without speaking.

"But you don't love him—you *can't*."

She was silent still.

"I've been considering over there," Kyle went on, evenly, "and I think in one sense you meant exactly what your words said. I don't know why I was so surprised—perhaps it's natural that you should still cling to him. I'm ignorant about the way women look at such things—some women. I don't know but I prize you the more for holding to an ideal, for your faithfulness, in spite of disillusionment. But, Esther, you are clinging to a rotten limb—it won't bear your weight. Do you know the sort of man your—the man you are willing to marry—has become?"

"Yes—I think I know."

"You are a very brave woman."

She gathered herself together, looking up at him, a certain desperation making her words distinct. "Do you not see—I gave him everything in perfect faith. . . . Always, Mr. Rieloff and—and Mr. Pemberton when I was little, and also when I was older, made light of laws, customs, of conventions: Mr. Rieloff, I know now, because he was strange, not right in his mind—he had had so much trouble.

"Mr. Pemberton believed in nothing. It was they two who taught me until my mind was in a maze. Then when Rutledge urged, when he also looked upon customs as folly, and your own will as supreme, it was only another form of what I had always heard—it did not sound so strange to me as it would to some. It was that teaching as much as my love that weakened my will, but in my heart, and to the little will I had left, *he was my husband*. Even when he turned his back upon me I looked upon him as that. Afterwards when I was insane with fear for my baby and Mr. Pemberton came, he who had taught me and played with me when I was little, when he came and would have left me again to my terror if I had not gone with him—even when I talked with him the feeling was still there dimly—back of all my wretch-

edness. To him, to Mr. Pemberton, I had no more to give than if I were wood or stone."

She paused, hesitated, then went on. "Mr. Kyle, it will seem as if I make excuse for myself when I say that he found me so far gone in despair that I was like an unreasoning animal, with only the determination to protect my baby so long as I could breathe. He took me, and the pressure of terrible fear was so suddenly removed that for a time I was only overwhelmed and dizzy. Then I learned each day, more and more, the extent of my ignorance, and the fearful thing he was trying to do to me. He meant to kill in me the thing that was *good*, and when I knew, the struggle between us began. I won because never for one moment had he laid hold upon me myself. He held a wooden image of myself, but my real self he never touched. It was fearful, that struggle, but at last I made him give me up, and send us back here.

"I grew to a woman in those weeks; there lifted in me a sense of power that almost never leaves me, except when I am suddenly sick with fear for Felice, as I was when they told me Mrs. Ericson had found her. . . . Mr. Kyle, during that time in France I had learned that help was possible to me, that there was provision for such as Felice. I talked to the priest in the little place in Southern France where we were, and when I came to New York I took Felice directly to the convent, an address the priest had given me.

"At the convent they gave me good advice. Then I began to push onward. I had unusual skill with the typewriter, and could both read and write and speak in French and German. It found me employment with a publishing house. At the same time I began illustrating, for advertisements, anything I could find. Gradually I made a little place for myself such as I have now. . . . I had to work night and day, with always the past to think of, but in all

that time the feeling that I still belonged to Rutledge never left me. It seemed to give me comfort, that thought, to make the thing I had done in the beginning more tolerable, less painful. I had given myself to Rutledge as completely and with as faithful intention as I should have done a few little hours later. He swore to me he was my husband—he ceased to be anything else, and my little girl was his and mine. I might lose every other feeling for him, but that bond remained.

“Mr. Kyle, I have learned much in these years of regret, and I have at last gathered together strength enough for this: if the opportunity is given me I shall for once in my life of mistakes do the thing that seems to me *right*, not the thing that tempts me, or the thing that appears a necessity. I have sometimes lost hold on myself—I did the other night in your room when I held the portrait of the snow-woman in my hand. I forgot then—for one moment I forgot completely—but I shall not again. In everything but just the letter of law we belong to *Rutledge*—I and Felice, my petite!”

She stopped her rapid speech a moment, her hands lifting. “Ah, Mr. Kyle, you do not know her, my little girl.” The fire leapt up in her, blazing suddenly in her eyes, flaming in her cheeks. “I mean that she shall have justice from those who have cast her off, who were willing that she should be just a bit of dirt in the street, a child such as I was. I wish her to have the name that is hers—I want her to have her share in the fortune that belongs to her—money is power. I have wished it every day—I have thought of it every night. *Nothing will turn me from it!* I will not be driven away from here by Mrs. Ericson—the greater fault lies with her, I am *certain*.” She stopped suddenly, as a flame will that has leapt high and dropped to ashes. “For myself—merely for myself . . . I wish—I think—only to be as I am,

dependent on no one, belonging to no one, but if other things are required of me, I can do them. . . . Mr. Kyle, I tell you all this because I promised to be honest with you." The tears had welled in her eyes, drowning her words.

Kyle looked down on her speechless. And he had wondered, even questioned, what experience had done to the real Esther.

The blood had risen to his temples as he listened, for her passionate sincerity had stirred sympathy in him, even while his reason refused to sanction her conclusions. His love clamored insistently for recognition, and jealousy also was alight in him, but Kyle had had enough experience with human nature to know that an absolute conviction, founded on faith and sentiment, is practically insurmountable; neither force nor reasoning will stir it. He was helpless against the spirit that looked at him out of Esther's wide eyes.

"You are even more of a woman than I thought," he said, at last. He spoke without a trace of anger or scorn, only quietly, with a touch of despair.

Her lips quivered, making the words uncertain. "If you had not driven me I would not have told you."

"I had to know—of course," he answered. "Esther, you don't love him; you love me, and still—"

"I love you too very much to come to you, Mr. Kyle, and I love Felice enough to go to the man who is her father—if he demands it."

"Yes," Kyle said, "and I'm helpless—I realize it."

He looked away from her to the blurred window. He wondered if he should tell her that Rutledge Ericson was much nearer to her than she knew. He remembered Mrs. Ericson's hints at the theatre, the gossip about Aleksandra, Rutledge's gray face the night before. Rutledge had not forgotten Esther. He considered all he had learned of Rutledge's career of headlong dissipation, and the look of

the man himself. Esther's life given into his hands again—Esther subject to his pleasure, and it fell to him to tell her that the man she persisted in calling her husband was within her easy reach!

His eyes came back to her, and he spoke some of his thoughts aloud. "I'm not going to urge myself upon you—that's useless. I think Rutledge Ericson may come to you, Esther; there is no predicting with a nature as irresponsible as his; but if he comes with any such demand as you seem to think possible, I do *not* believe you will give yourself to him. When the necessity is there, facing you, your courage will fail, for you cannot look in his face and realize what he has become, and give yourself up to him. That is my one hope. If I didn't know so well just what he is, I should hold my tongue, but he is not fit to be the husband of any woman. Neither your child's interests nor any other consideration is weighty enough to demand such a sacrifice of you. . . . You think of him as he was—not as he is."

She met his disapproval with a little gesture of protest. "I cannot expect you to agree with me, Mr. Ky-el," she said, her soft accent become pronounced in its wistfulness. "But if you would say that I am right to feel as I do, I would be so very great deal happier."

"You little child!" Kyle answered, his voice suddenly harsh with feeling. "I can't say to you a thing I don't believe. You have no right to set aside your own individuality as you propose to do. Such a sacrifice is *not* demanded of you, or any woman."

"I think, then, exactly opposite from you?"

The appealing note was there, in her soft voice, in the gray of her eyes, the curve of her lips, and in the sudden sense of desolation that gripped him Kyle spoke out abruptly the knowledge that weighed upon him.

"He is here—in New York—within reach of you, and you ask me to agree with you!"

"He—Rutledge—*here?*"

A wave of emotion swept her face, lifting her to her feet, setting her hand groping for the support of the couch. Her words were a terrified whisper, her dilated eyes going to the door as if he actually stood on the threshold, and Kyle went to her and took her in his arms as he had that night in his room.

"You look like that at the mere thought of his coming, and yet you would go to him!" He held her close, kissing her long and tenderly. "Esther, isn't love the better choice?"

"No," she said, against his lips.

"I will take you away—wherever you wish—do your will. . . . I have an honest name for you and Felice."

"No," she repeated. "No; I am not afraid."

"I saw your face, Esther."

"I am not afraid," she answered, firmly. "You spoke so very suddenly. You must let me go now," and he obeyed her.

She stood very straight then, her arms pressed to her sides, holding herself erect by pure will, white but controlled.

Kyle looked at her in silence, then he said, "It is utterly useless," in the same tone in which he had said, "I am helpless."

"Mr. Kyle, by and by you will see as I do."

He answered her only by a gesture of dissent. "You'll come to me at once if you are in trouble—promise me that, Esther? And I'm coming here to you just the same as I have?"

"But certainly, Mr. Kyle, and I shall never again be afraid to ask your help—there is nothing hidden now between us—that is to me one great, large comfort," and she smiled bravely over his brief words of farewell, standing erect until the door closed on him. But then she shrank and settled down, crouched on the floor like a woman of the East who

mourns, her face against her knees, her hands clasped behind her head. She sat so a long time, then crept over to the couch, and, still kneeling, drew into her arms an empty glove that lay there, dropped from a man's pocket. She held it, touching it, caressing it, as if it were a head against her breast, a cheek against her own, lips that answered her whisper of love.

She had used her brain, and many brave words, but it was the heart of Esther that demanded that hour of bitter weeping, and those moments of abandon.

CHAPTER XX

KYLE wondered as he examined his mail and sorted his papers on Monday morning if a necessary routine was ever a sedative to harassed nerves; yet the quiescence of his long Sunday had been unbearable. His part must be to watch and wait, but he doubted his power of endurance. Formerly, if he sat alone for an evening, or if he returned late and glanced down the passage to Esther's door, his imagination pictured her as working, always working; his mental vision saw her at her table, her hair loosened a little, the coils resting on her neck, her sleeves turned back at the wrists, but she was always alone when he was not with her—except during those wretched days when he had not known where she was. They had been fit forerunners to the long day that he had just lived through; they had been bad enough, but this was far worse, for while he sat alone another might be with her, and he had no power to prevent. He must simply sit and bear it, the thought of it, hour after hour. Would that consciousness that was worse than physical pain live with him through the working day also? . . . The doors into the outer office opened and closed, mingling the bellow of the city with the click of the typewriter and the voices of those who came in and out, a medley of sound that aroused a dull irritation in him. Kyle knew that presently he must close the door into the outer office and endeavor to bolster his recreant will; to lose hold on it, to idly watch it slipping from him, meant ultimate disaster.

He half rose with the intention of shutting his door, but sat back again, holding himself very erect, for directly in his line of vision, on almost the same spot where Esther had sat three years before, was Rutledge Ericson. He waited the

pleasure of the office boy, hat in hand, his dark eyes fixed on Kyle. Kyle met his look steadily, glances that crossed like the momentary touch of steel on steel, and then Kyle rose and came to the door, and Rutledge also rose to meet him.

"Good-morning, Ericson. Did you want to see me, or Mr. Balfour?" Kyle asked. Neither man offered his hand.

"You, Kyle—if you are not engaged."

"Not at present. Come in."

Kyle closed the door, and pointed his visitor to a chair, but he himself remained standing. Rutledge seated himself, moving somewhat stiffly, then turned sidewise, one leg crossed over the other, the same attitude he had taken a few nights before at Floyd-Kaufman's theatre. He wore the prevailing brown of the season, and was from the crown of his head to the tips of his shoes a specimen of perfect grooming. In the clear morning light the puffs beneath his eyes were more apparent, the roughness of his skin giving him a certain set expression, as if not merely his skin had hardened, but also the muscles beneath. The deep-cut lines about his mouth only emphasized the perpetual lift of his mobile upper lip, a faintly scornful curl made equally impressive either by a fiery glance under level black brows, or by a dull eye, utterly careless, indifferent, heavy. The brilliant glance accentuated the animalism of the face, the dull eye made its expression too indifferent to be sullen. This morning his eye was alight.

"I'll only keep you a minute," Rutledge said. "I—you don't mind if I smoke?"

He had already lighted a cigarette with a deft movement that suggested practise, but he waited for Kyle's "Certainly not" before tossing the burnt match into the waste-paper basket.

"I had a talk with Floyd last night," Rutledge said, alertly, "and he sent me to you. I went to him to ask about that painting of Pemberton's—I'd like to buy it of him if

he'll part with it—and I want to know more of its history. Floyd says you know a good deal more than he does about it; he sent me to you for information."

"I am afraid he sent you to the wrong person." Kyle was brief.

Rutledge eyed him for a moment. "Floyd either didn't know or he preferred not to tell me its history, and he was mum about the way it came into his hands, but he said you knew the woman who had once owned it, and she could tell me more about it than any one else. . . . He said you could give me her name and address."

"He was mistaken," Kyle replied.

"You don't know the woman who was former owner of the 'Despair,' then?"

"Yes, I know her, but I doubt if she would care to have any one who happened to inquire sent to her. Floyd-Kaufman's introduction of Pemberton's painting the other night was sensational, to say the least, and I can imagine that a woman would rather not be placed in the position of having reporters, or prospective purchasers of the painting like yourself, coming to her. . . . I certainly should not feel free to give any one her address until I had her sanction."

"Oh, I see," Rutledge said, promptly. "You are her legal adviser, of course—or are you her guardian? . . . I shall have to go elsewhere for the history of Floyd's Pemberton; a longer way round, that's all." His remark stopped short of a sneer, but it bristled with insolence, the instinctive recognition of an antagonism that no phrases however politely worded could conceal.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, but you doubtless understand," Kyle returned, his glance even more steady and cold. He turned to the door with an air of dismissal that Rutledge was quick to read. It lowered his brows and flushed him scarlet, an anger that had no adequate explanation, for

apparently Kyle's manner was only that of the exceedingly busy man to whom time is precious.

"Good-morning," Rutledge said, curtly; "sorry I troubled you." He went out of the office, walking more rapidly than was his wont, his lagging step become a limp. "God damn him—and his politeness," he muttered, as he made his way along the corridor to the elevator. "I'd like to choke him—I will some day if he gets in my way. . . . If Floyd doesn't speak out I'll go to Margaret; and, well, if she fails me, there's more than one way to pick a lock, and money's the best jimmy, after all."

Kyle stood and watched him go, then went back to his place at the desk and frowned over his papers and in the faces of his clients, endeavoring to fix his attention on matters that had no interest whatever for him, for the passion that is as strong as love was alive in him. And while his lips formed words adequate to the needs of the day, his thoughts followed a course of their own. "He wants information, does he, and through me—through me! That's asking too much of endurance! . . . Damn the insolence of him! . . . The cad—to come to any self-respecting man and question him about the woman he has wronged! His mother knows where she is and so does he. If he has an atom of decency in him, let him go direct to her and ask his questions there." And then came the ever-present anxiety to guard Esther's welfare. "So Floyd will hold his tongue—it's his way of telling me so and at the same time planting a thorn in my side as revenge for my plain speaking the other night. . . . But how can she persist? How can she look at him and persist in her folly! . . . She can't—unless underneath everything else, her distrust, and her timidity, she wants him—as she did back there before the beginning of things. . . . I wish I knew." In some of which troubled meditations Kyle was right, but in most of which he was wrong—mistakes that are quite possible even to the astute.

CHAPTER XXI

It was gray morning when Rutledge let himself into his house. His cab had brought him to the curb, depositing him within a few feet of his own door, but those few feet had been sufficient to wet his shoes and powder him from head to foot with great clinging snowflakes. It was a dream night, soft, mild, still, a steady descent of white wings that touched lightly, clung a moment, and were gone; a night of deadened sound that the lights of the city made fairy-like, unreal.

Rutledge stood a moment under the night-lamp in the lower hall, slowly divesting himself of his coat. The long drawing-rooms, a pall of darkness, were on his right, the library on his left. It was an old-fashioned house of high ceilings and heavy cornices, this home of the Ericsons'; even in the day when Bland Ericson had purchased the mansion, it was out of date. He had a preference for Mansard roofs and Venetian blinds, narrow windows and heavy mahogany, and he had determinedly withheld Mrs. Ericson's innovating hand.

Rutledge stood still for a time, looking up. In Bland Ericson's latter days, on the frequent occasions when he entered his house in the still hours, making but a denser shadow in the dim hall, he was in the habit of stopping and looking up at the landing above. It was a shrewd look, not untinged with amusement, and often he laughed a little to himself, but unmirthfully. And just so Rutledge stood now, looking up, watching, his eyes on the far corner of the landing above, and presently a shadow that was somewhat more definite than the gloom about it moved back from the stair-railing, and became one with the black line of wall.

Rutledge laughed also, angrily, contemptuously; then he shivered, "Ugh!"

He began to mount the stairs, his eyes on the wall beyond the stair-railing, but when he touched the electric button on the banister, and the upper hall lost its shadows, nothing moved; the place was empty save for its gilt and green and mahogany. Rutledge went to his door that faced his mother's across the hall, and flooded his rooms with light. He was alone there; the house was asleep, all but himself and the shifting shadow he had seen on the landing.

Rutledge had not removed his hat, he had forgotten it while he watched the figure above him, and he walked about now with it still on his head. He went into his bedroom, looked about, and returned to the small table upon which was set, temptingly displayed, a silver tray with glasses and whiskey. A napkin covered several dainty sandwiches, and a silver dish held olives. Rutledge raised the napkin and looked, then lifted the spirit-bottle to the light, eying it thoughtfully. His expression was dull, his face fallen into the lines that aged it, making the muscles appear immovable. He held the bottle on a level with his eye, shaking it until the liquor it contained sparkled and bubbled. How often in the years since his father's death had he returned after midnight and found the same tempting preparation for his comfort, the same skilful presentation of the irresistible? He might drink, but not of that. If he wished to drink, the cupboard in his room was well stocked—he did not need liquor of his mother's providing. He carried it to the bathroom and poured it out to the last drop; he would rather not look at it. Since midnight he had been drinking cautiously, the gradual yielding to a craving that as the days went on would become more and more insistent until the climax was reached. That was inevitable. His life had come to mean simply a series of these climaxes, the intervals between

become shorter and shorter, but for that night he had had enough; he could wait until morning when there would be a more natural stimulus than liquor offered him.

Rutledge had spent a long day in the quest that had carried him to Kyle's office that morning, and not until almost midnight had he been rewarded. The feverish unrest of the day had culminated in a scene that had been intensely painful. Since midnight he had been endeavoring to deaden sensibility, and at the same time retain the power to reason, to carry himself as usual, to curb his anger. He was not ready to yield himself up to a debauch; the morrow promised too much to his eagerness, but sleep was out of the question, and he had yielded to his craving enough only to make the long hours of waiting bearable.

Since the Friday evening at Floyd-Kaufman's when the sight of the "Despair" had suddenly sobered him, Rutledge had been treating himself with more than usual circumspection. He needed little stimulus other than the fever of his quest. It was a letter from Mrs. Rieloff that had brought Mrs. Ericson to New York in haste, and it was Mrs. Rieloff who had aroused Rutledge to action. Her letter to him had been vague, incoherent, a collection of hints, but they had been sufficient to bring him across the Atlantic. They presented his mother to him in a strange light, set him to pondering the meaning of conduct which he had always been too careless to analyze. During his ocean journey Rutledge had restrained himself, drinking only moderately, the gradual lessening of amount and lengthening of intervals that the physician practises on his drug-ridden patient. He was experienced in the art of sobering himself. When the craving took him the joy was in yielding, in gradually succumbing, in tasting his delight. Until he finally reached the stage of entire stupefaction he was his own tempter, ministering to his craving, determinedly spurring his senses until by degrees they reached

saturnalia, and then the step beyond—oblivion. In the exhaustion of awakening, a curious caution took his diseased will captive, leading him back to reason, steadying shaken nerves, ministering to the after craving with the care and wisdom of a scientist. Mrs. Ericson had left him at the end of a long debauch, and Mrs. Rieloff's letter had been given him on his first return to reason. It had brought him to New York in less than a week after his mother's arrival, and only two days before Floyd-Kaufman's evening of triumph. With a caution unusual to him, Rutledge had kept his own counsel, for when aroused and suspicious he displayed some of his father's coolness. So to Mrs. Ericson he had given a reason for his return, and she had believed him.

"It's splendid to have you here, of course," she had ventured, on the night of his arrival, "but really, Rutledge, you are beyond anything—suddenly, in a night, to rush off like this!"

"I was only following your example," Rutledge had returned. "You gave some very good reason for having to leave—I'm afraid I wasn't in condition to grasp what it was—but the desire took me, too, suddenly."

"I've been begging you for a year to come back," Mrs. Ericson persisted, "but nothing would move you."

Rutledge looked at her with the shrewd glance that was not frequent with him; he had always been too careless to be keen-witted. It was his father's look, a mixture of contempt, amusement, and commingled with both a something that was threatening.

"My dear madame," he said, "it was only a part of your excellent management of me. When urged forward I always back. It's awfully simple—every farmer practises it on his calf."

A truly remarkable speech for Rutledge Ericson!

"You silly creature!" his mother exclaimed, clutching at

lightness in her endeavor to cover affright. "It's a woman, of course—Aleksandra?"

"You are quite right—as usual," Rutledge answered, unsmiling. "It most certainly is a woman," and Mrs. Ericson ventured no farther. She felt very sure that he had followed the dancer, but his attitude made her uneasy.

During the succeeding days Rutledge had come and gone, absenting himself, or remaining at home as pleased him, and without a single word of explanation. Mrs. Ericson, well trained by long years of experience, eliminated herself as much as possible, though from behind the scenes she watched him lynx-eyed and tireless. He was very quiet, and for him abstemious, and Mrs. Ericson feared and considered many things in those three or four days.

Rutledge had never been an affectionate son; Mrs. Ericson was not an affectionate mother, but outwardly, as long as she refrained from interference with his pleasures, he treated her with politeness, and in money matters he had always been generous. Rutledge had looked upon his mother as a necessity, a habit, as much a part of himself as his clothes, but as possessing no sort of influence or restraint upon him. She was very clever; Rutledge had always respected her cleverness, her capacity to meet every emergency, and her willingness to shoulder all the disagreeables of life and make the best of them; she had always stood at his elbow, quick to assist him, or follow out his dictates. The dictates were the results of her own suggestion, but Rutledge was too careless and self-absorbed to realize what might have been plain to some.

It was through suggestion that she accomplished her will, never through opposition. Except for one short year she had been unable to rule the father; if possible she meant to rule the son, but Rutledge was too much his father's son to permit of ordinary methods. She had been forced to choose a more subtle way, and in reality had made herself the strongest

formative influence in his life; she and his environment had made him what he was. He had received his viewpoint from her; he had imbibed it with his babyhood. She was a woman of keen mind, and had stood close to him during the years when character is formed; her impress was ineradicable.

When Rutledge had reached the age for license Bland Ericson had passed into oblivion, and she had been free to follow out her devices. Under cover of leaving him absolutely free, entire master of his own will, she had steadily abetted him in his wild life, and when vulgar entanglements were the result her quick wit was always at his command. During the last three years these had been nothing but ephemeral attachments, frequent enough, but bordering on mere vagaries. Rutledge's mad pursuit of Madame Aleksandra had been the one exception, a terror from which Mrs. Ericson was still trembling, for she had no knowledge of what relation actually existed between them; she had her fears, her doubts, and had reached some curious conclusions in the course of her meditations, but from Rutledge she had been unable to extract an explanation. It was always so—when it was a matter that touched the inner Rutledge, the self he instinctively withheld from her inspection, she was driven to deduction or mere supposition. She feared him when he became secretive; then he was like his father, hardened steel to her ineffectual chisel. She realized that she had failed to make him as unscrupulous as herself, because there was hidden beyond her reach a substratum of character that she had not been able to disintegrate. Regarding his way of life in general, Rutledge was as candid with her as he would have been with a man of his acquaintance, for she had always treated his unbridled fancies lightly.

"Dear me, Rutledge, have a good time, the best going, but don't get into serious messes," she always admonished, amusedly, but she frequently took occasion to remark admir-

ingly of others, "After all, they have the right philosophy: extract every iota of sensation possible out of life, and finish with the dregs quickly. One can sip at a drink a long time if one chooses, and it's always possible to swallow the dregs at a gulp. I intend to live not one minute after the taste gets bitter. It's only a matter of will after all—dying's the easiest thing in the world." Rutledge had had the suggestion presented to him in all forms from the time Bland Ericson had ceased to be master of his house and fortune. In the last three years Rutledge had occasionally pondered his mother's sayings—when he was in a condition to ponder anything—for he had begun to taste the dregs.

It was of Mrs. Ericson Rutledge was thinking now, urged by the same sardonic humor that had made him laugh in the hall, and that had prompted him to empty the spirit-bottle and fling the napkin of sandwiches into the waste-paper basket. But those had been only small indications of the cold fury that possessed him. By an extraordinary exertion of will he had kept silent since his return, pursuing his course secretly. Mrs. Rieloff's letter had angered him against his mother, arousing his contempt, and awakening his suspicions, but he meant to have something more than hints from Mrs. Rieloff before he confronted Mrs. Ericson. His first step had been to search for the woman, two days that had been unfruitful of results. Then he had seen the "Despair," a shock that was overwhelming. He had gone to Floyd-Kaufman, to Kyle, then to Margaret Acres, and learned nothing from any one of them, a Saturday, Sunday, and Monday of feverish unrest. Late Monday night he learned of Mrs. Rieloff's whereabouts, and it was after midnight when he finally left her. He was sick with disgust, white with anger, cold with determination. He had allowed himself only a little stimulant—enough to support him till daylight and the possibility of action; to close his eyes had been an impossibility. As he

walked aimlessly about his room he knew that behind her door his mother was quite as wide awake as he; or was she again haunting the hall, listening for sounds in his room? How many years had he lived under the same secret surveillance, blundering about, engrossed by his pleasures, and she always smilingly looking on! It had all been perfectly patent to every one but himself. Perhaps she was at that moment bending to his keyhole. What if he went to her door and played with her a little, deceiving her as she had deceived him ever since he could remember? He was restless under outrage, writhing under intolerable pain; this period of inaction was beyond his endurance.

He jerked his door open and crossed the hall. Mrs. Ericson's door was ajar, and yielded a few inches to the impetus of his sharp knock. There was perfect silence until he repeated his summons, then Mrs. Ericson called:

"Is that you, Rutledge?"

"Yes," he replied, "it is I."

"Wait until I put on something. What is it—are you ill?"

"Not at all; I'm in excellent health," Rutledge answered. "I only want your blessing before I go out."

There was a silence, then she returned in her bright, childish voice, "At this time in the morning—dear me!"

She came to her door wrapped in her dressing-gown, eying him keenly in the dim morning light. He was deadly pale, even his lips gray, and he was still wearing his hat. She was quick to draw her conclusions. Had his eye been dull she would have been absolutely certain that in a few hours he would be helpless. His eyes, however, were brilliant, a new manifestation that puzzled her slightly.

"Come in, Rut," she said. "We'll have some light, and you can lie down here if you like."

Rutledge eyed her steadily. "No, thanks; I'm going out

presently. I only wanted your sanction to my engagement. I am going to be married, Madame, and provide myself with an heir."

She received the announcement in silence; then she said, quietly, "So it's Aleksandra?" She wondered if he was completely intoxicated, or speaking with some degree of reason.

"You have no objections to offer, have you, Madame?" He spoke so collectedly that she decided he must be less intoxicated than she thought.

She pursued the policy of half a lifetime. "Certainly not. Whatever is your wish is mine, of course, Rutledge. But come in and let me congratulate you."

"Thank you," he said, evenly. "I haven't time to come in."

"But I want to hear your plans—the when, and the where—how soon I am to hand over the keys."

She laughed a little, and he observed her crooked mouth, its mirthless upward twist, and the hard wrinkles about her eyes. His mother! His eyes glazed with an expression that was dumbly suffering, that he would not have her see. He looked away from her to the cold light of the windows.

"There'll be time enough to discuss that," he replied, in a lower voice. He had a sudden urging to be gone; he felt ill. "It's morning at last," he muttered. He succeeded in bringing his eyes back to her. "I'm going out."

She did not want him to go—the wish to have him helpless again in her hands had been the one paramount desire during those days of anxious watching. That would give her time—postpone his marriage—enable her to ward off the dangers that threatened her.

She smoothed his way as usual. "If you waited a little you could have the brougham, couldn't you? It's turned nasty and cold, Rut. . . . And after all you'd be more com-

fortable in your room." Her manner was careless, as usual, but her glance was significant. It brought his hand to his head, and the flaming look he gave her suddenly staggered her.

"I beg your pardon, Madame," he said. "I had quite forgotten that I was standing in the presence of *my mother*."

He removed his hat with exaggerated concern and, turning abruptly, went down the stairs. Half way down he stopped and looked up into her staring eyes.

"Don't trouble to provide me with refreshments to-night, Madame; I must accustom myself to do without your kind attentions, and don't above all things worry over the cold. I've made up my mind not to be carried up these stairs as my father was," and he went on, closing the front door heavily behind him.

Mrs. Ericson did not move at once, not until she realized that she was cold. The quiet house was chilly—no one astir as yet, the fires untended. She drew her dressing-gown closer about her, and shut herself into her room. She was actually shivering. What new devil of drink possessed Rutledge now? She thought she was inured to every possible vagary of his, but his random remarks had an edge that cut her. It was because she was living in a stretch of nerves that was becoming unbearable. After twenty years or so of strain it was quite possible that nerve and accurate judgment might fail her—occasionally. She was hypersensitive. If Rutledge had even a suspicion of the truth, he would be unable to keep his knowledge from her for ten minutes; it had never been possible for him to control anger. She had the contempt of her son's intellect that a long period of dominance is liable to beget. She quieted her uneasiness now by bringing her cool judgment to bear on the situation. She even derived some comfort from the thought of his marriage with the dancer. Mrs. Ericson knew why Rutledge had so immediately suc-

cumbed to Madame Aleksandra. It was a sudden revival of his old infatuation for Esther Rieloff. At first sight the resemblance between the two was remarkable. He had followed the dancer to London; he had returned with her to Paris, and kept his own counsel because he was in earnest. Then came Madame Aleksandra's unexpected engagement in New York, and the thing that Mrs. Ericson had succeeded in avoiding for three years was imminent—Rutledge would in all likelihood return to America. It was that certainty as much as Mrs. Rieloff's letter than had hurried Mrs. Ericson to New York while her son was not in a condition to question, or follow immediately. It would give her time to get Mrs. Rieloff out of the way, to discover what Kyle's relation to Esther was, and fortify herself generally before Rutledge appeared. Mrs. Rieloff's letter had been disjointed and wandering, but it was clear enough in the statement that Esther and her child were living, that Esther was in the same house with Kyle, and her child in St. Cecilia's Convent. A startling announcement in itself; she had considered the girl as good as dead.

Since the day of her arrival in New York, Mrs. Ericson had been searching for Mrs. Rieloff, but without success; the woman had disappeared. That had been one cause of anxiety. Mrs. Ericson's manoeuvres in regard to Esther had been more satisfactory. Kyle had lived for months under the same roof with Esther and taken no steps to espouse Esther's cause. The deduction was natural enough to Mrs. Ericson. Kyle possessed Esther, and would be quick to withdraw her from attention. Mrs. Ericson acted in pursuance of her theory, and apparently with perfect success. She had gone first to the convent and made herself evident; then she had followed it with a warning that she felt would be plain to Kyle, his appearance at the theatre on the night when they had watched Aleksandra together offering her an excellent opportunity.

She had intended to convey to Kyle the intimation that she was aware of his relation to Esther, and the subtle impression that Rutledge had not forgotten, and had found Aleksandra attractive because of her undeniable likeness to the girl he had wronged. Kyle would not be likely to overlook such a warning. The manoeuvre was characteristic of Mrs. Ericson. The involved and roundabout way was a necessity to her; even when driven into a corner and aroused to desperation she was incapable of being direct.

Apparently her judgment had been admirable. The next day after her warning to Kyle she had gone to the Sixteenth Street house, and found that Esther had already been removed. A message to Kyle's office had disclosed the fact that he also was out of town, and at the convent she was refused all information. Kyle had acted quickly, and she was relieved somewhat of anxiety. In his pursuit of Aleksandra, Rutledge would not be allowed to run across Esther; if Kyle loved a woman he would know how to guard her.

And that very night Rutledge had appeared. She had been quite right in her surmise—he had followed Aleksandra as soon as possible, marvellously soon, too soon; he must indeed be in earnest. He had come in a suspicious frame of mind also; he was annoyed with her, that was patent. Notwithstanding his air of indifference when she had so hurriedly appeared in London he must in reality have been annoyed at what was so plainly espionage on her part, and now he was angered at her for her haste in forestalling him in New York; it was only natural, but would wear off. After a little thought she explained his peculiar manner that morning on the same grounds. He was more than half intoxicated, and still irritated; it would pass off with the excitement of his next debauch; he was in exactly the condition that presaged a wilder debauch than usual, and his abstinence of the last week would insure a more complete yielding to appetite when

the craving once controlled him; by night even he might be entirely forgetful of Aleksandra or any other woman.

He was strangely ignorant and unsuspecting of his own desperate strait. If he passed through this crisis, and even another, and finally carried out his intention of marrying the dancer, trouble between them would be immediate; with his habits it would be unavoidable and in the stress of it Rutledge would most certainly turn to her for assistance, just as he always had. If she lost her place beside him for a short time it would only be to regain it again, and with added power. She need not worry over this contemplated marriage—it was not accomplished yet, and if Rutledge bore out the promise that lay in his appearance that morning it might never be. Why borrow trouble?

Mrs. Ericson smiled her most unmirthful and twisted smile, as she coiled her small body into still smaller compass beneath the covers of her couch and faced the growing daylight. She was ready to raise her head and strike in any direction that her quick brain suggested as secret and safe, but at the same time there was a fever burning her; it had been with her ever since she had read Mrs. Rieloff's letter in Paris, the same rage that had set her screaming at Kyle on the last occasion he had sat in that room with her. She remembered so very distinctly the light in his eyes, and the emphasis of his retort, "Find her—if it's a possibility."

Well, he had found Esther, and kept her close beside him. . . . Once, some years ago, she had been ready to give up her long struggle for a fortune, willing to share comparative poverty with Kyle. No other man's companionship had ever so tempted her. If he had loved her enough to listen to her when Bland Ericson's death left her free, she would have let Rutledge alone and let him ruin himself in his own way and not in hers.

Perhaps Rutledge would have come out no better and no

worse than hundreds of other young men. . . . But only a miracle could save him now, and it was her work. . . . They had made an ugly thing of her, those years of struggle and concealment, and Kyle had been clear-eyed enough to see beneath the surface—almost from the beginning. . . . Was he very happy with Esther, Mrs. Ericson wondered? She remembered his flushed look as he watched Aleksandra. He was thinking of Esther then, she knew it as certainly as if he had told her so, and he had been free to go straight from the theatre to her! And because of her necessity she had been forced to tighten rather than loosen Kyle's protective arms—drive Esther to hide her face more determinedly against his breast! . . . Maud Ericson turned with a curt word and set her teeth on a fold of her dressing-gown; had it been something animate, a thing that could suffer, the relief might have been more adequate.

CHAPTER XXII

"It is Esther!" Rutledge said, and she repeated his words more clearly, "Yes—it is Esther."

She held herself erect, motionless, under her skylight.

Rutledge stood on her threshold just as Kyle had so often stood, the light of the room on his face, but this was daylight, the white searching light of snow-sheathed morning. It was early, not yet nine o'clock, and Esther wore hat and coat ready for descent to the street. She had come back from her open door to get something from her table, gloves, a paper, some trifle, and when she turned he stood in her doorway. She had answered him mechanically, without volition, then her hand went to the table for support, for the figure at the door was suddenly blurred, an object that swayed, that was uncertain, but came nearer.

"Close the door," she said, in a voice that was without modulation. She did not know why she said it, unless it was that out of her numbed consciousness there lifted immediately the knowledge that Kyle always looked down the passage to her door. She must endure through the next hour, but she wished to save him any part in it, a torment to bear about with him throughout the day. Her thoughts had flown to him before they took note of herself, or anything more than recognition of the figure at the door.

Rutledge was at her side now, close to her, yet his voice seemed to her to come from a great distance. "Esther, she lied to me," he said, violently.

"Who lied to you?" she returned, vaguely.

Esther had recognized him instantly—now she realized the changes three years had made in his face. The few

moments of clearer perception were sufficient to register impressions.

Rutledge was pouring out his words, rapidly, impetuously. "My mother, Esther, she lied to me. She told me I had killed you. I nearly died myself; I was out of my head for a month, and when I was conscious she told me that, and I believed her—I thought I had killed you—when we were thrown, the last idea I had was that I had killed you—you and myself. She wouldn't tell me anything at first—she put me off until I was certain she had the worst to tell—oh, she was clever about it—then finally she told me you were dead. . . . She brought me the papers—they said you had been killed—there was a notice of the accident in the papers. Of course I believed her; I was so certain of it myself that I never thought of questioning. Don't you see how that would be? I wasn't out of my bed for weeks afterwards, and then I was hustled off to Europe. And I didn't care where I went—the farther away the better. I never even *suspected* the truth until I saw that vile thing of Pemberton's. Then it came over me that she had lied about you—of course she had—just as she has about other things. . . . And you for these three years?" His hand was on her arm; he had dropped from violence to a softer note.

Esther drew back, groping for the chair behind her. "Let me sit down," she said. The weight on her head hurt her so that it brought her hands to her forehead, her usual gesture when driven. She felt her hat and took it off, drawing out the pins with shaking hands.

Rutledge's arm was about her shoulders now, his face bent to hers. "My little Lady, you're mine still—the three years don't count—I wasn't to blame."

She put her hand against his breast, holding him off. "Hush!" she said. "Why do you need to tell me a falsehood—why do you come at all? You knew so well as your mother that I was living—you turned your back upon me."

"Before God I did not, Esther. *I did not!*"

She held him off still. "Ach," she said, shivering, "that is terrible! Do not lie like that! . . . You wrote to that old man; you said, 'I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name.' You set the law on me."

"What are you talking about?" Rutledge demanded, hotly.

"You wrote to the little gray man, Mr. Burnham; he showed it to me when I went to him—when I went to find you three years ago. I can say the letter—I have said it to myself hundreds of times—'It's too bad you have to be bothered with my affairs. Please settle the Rieloff business as you and my mother think best. I am sorry I ever knew any one by that name.' It was what you wrote." She repeated the words monotonously, drawing back from him as far as her chair would permit.

She was terrified at her own feelings and the thing they made of the future. It had needed only his presence, his touch, and a few words to define the past and predict the future. Kyle had warned her that her courage would fail. Rutledge's first word had made clear his unchanged attitude. He had come directly to her, and laid hands upon her.

He was looking at her, puzzled, scowling in his search of memory. "If I wrote—I—don't remember," he said, slowly, considering. Then his look suddenly cleared. "God—I know now! She asked me to write it. She said Mrs. Rieloff had come to her threatening to make a fuss because of the accident, damages or something of the kind, and if I wrote to Mr. Burnham he would settle with the woman. I wasn't able to be up yet; I was sick all over. I never went to sleep that I didn't dream that whole awful thing over again—you and I standing up for that one minute, and then the plunge. I did write to Mr. Burnham—I remember now. I was sorry enough I had ever seen you and brought you to that!"

The mistake of three years was made clear. His explanation carried them back, placing them where they were that morning when they had stood for a moment that had been a lifetime, and looked into each other's eyes. He had set aside three years of life and come to her now with the same demand he had made upon her then. Despite the telltale lines in his face he remained in feeling, in attitude to her, exactly the same. She saw again the vision of a dying fire, heard again the stinging sweep of rain-laden wind, felt his arms about her, his lips at her ear, but the memory merely turned her cold, stiffened her, adding to the weight on her head. He had stood still, and she had taken a long journey into new lands that had no relation or likeness to old surroundings. She had wandered too far to return, yet it must be her part to bring the old into the new, to put her arms about a dead thing, yield because of the chains that night of her vision had linked about her. Kyle saw no necessity; he refused her the sanction of his judgment, but Kyle was not right. Rutledge's demand was immediate; it lay in the first word he had uttered, "Esther." It was a claim, a command, a bridging of the interval. He had not forsaken her, he had not forgotten her; at his first knowledge of the truth he had come to her. Every atom of her was shrinking, reluctant, but she had never once during the last two years thought it would be otherwise. In thinking of the possibilities of the future had she not been able to set herself aside?

"You believe me now?" he was demanding of her.

"Yes," she replied.

"You know now who was to blame, Esther?"

"Yes; your mother."

"It chokes me to call her that—I don't know what to call her. I cursed her last night when that Rieloff woman told me her story. I got the whole thing from her last night at the hospital. She wrote me a bundle of hints and I came

after her. I've been searching for her since the day I arrived here, and last night they found her. She told me all she knew about you. I told you the first suspicion I had was when I saw that painting of Pemberton's, and since Friday I've been running about from pillar to post, trying to find out something, and without success until they sent me word that the Rieloff woman had been brought to the hospital. It was almost morning when I got away from her. They say she'll die before night—I hope she will—though dying's too good for her—and my mother! . . . I keep forgetting she's my mother. . . . But she shall pay—I know how to make her do it. I thought it all out before morning; we can make her bite dust." He looked enraged, vicious, his cheeks empurpled, his eyes red-rimmed; he had been in the grip of anger for hours.

Esther noticed the turgid skin, the ridged forehead, and the hard mouth; even the expression of his eyes had changed. They were harder, bolder. The reckless, ungovernable temper of the boy had solidified, become more determined and calculating. The light-heartedness of boyhood was gone. But his voice was the same. It held the same note when he said, "My little Lady," and it had moved her not at all.

Esther had learned to read men's faces in those three years of experience, and Rutledge's was written upon in large characters. What was there she could appeal to, work upon, in this man? She was thinking of their child now, not of herself; a few additional moments had enabled her to take a step forward into calmness. Her first feeling of affright, of shrinking, of physical impossibility, had settled into a sense of detachment, of withdrawal into the depths of her being, that presented merely the husk of herself to masculine demand. It was the old attitude to Pemberton revived. She felt lifeless, frozen. Physically she denied him; mentally, spiritually, she was more than ever alive to a claim that she

had never denied. She had returned to the conviction that had made her refusal of Kyle possible: in intention she had taken Rutledge to love, cherish, and obey; they two were joined together in one; it was not *her* child, it was *their* child, the fruition of intention. She was now doubly bound for he had remained in feeling and intention the same. Had he not in reality been more faithful to memory than she? But he had not lived as she had for three years in hourly acknowledgment of a brutal desertion. There was nothing alive in her now but the thought of Felice, and a curious sense of duty to a man who appeared a stranger but who at the same time wore a painfully familiar aspect. Kyle had his real triumph in those moments when Esther sat thinking and listening; the last two months of companionship with a nature that had touched every cord of sympathy in her had done their work. Of the real Rutledge she had never known anything at all; the real Rutledge was the man she now saw beside her—whose touch chilled her.

She looked away from him while he talked, her expression more calm than that of the "Despair." She had listened a little vaguely to his bitter denunciation and threats of vengeance against his mother.

"Yes," she said, "but sit down, please. I cannot talk like this." She felt an immeasurable relief when his arm left her shoulder.

Rutledge muttered a word and, turning about, dragged up a chair. He sat on its edge, his knee against her own, his hand at her waist; it was an attitude of possession more determined than the former pressure on her shoulder.

"My little Lady," he said, "for three years you've thought me a brute. I don't blame you for being frightened of me. You have been staring at me as if I came from the dead. I don't blame you for anything—I only want you to love me again." The ugly look of anger was fading, eagerness taking its place.

Esther set his words aside. "Did Mrs. Rieloff tell you—everything?" she asked, steadily.

"She told me all about my mother and herself, about those things that happened years ago, about the money my mother paid her, the whole damned business. Mrs. Rieloff said you knew all about it. She told me about you, back there at River Road, and all she knew about the way you had lived here. She said you had given her money the other day so she could go away, but she had to have her opium first of all, and she took too much. After days of it the police dragged her out of some hole—a nasty tale it all was, and turned me sick."

"You know, then, about—your child?" Her face had been without color, her brows lifted and her look dull, but her question suddenly softened every set muscle, lighting her eyes. With her the mention of the child brought no embarrassment; it brought warmth with it, a lifting of oppression, but Rutledge colored darkly, for it stranded him on unfamiliar ground. A child, his child and hers; he felt that there was something he ought to say to her, some recognition of a strange thing that of necessity demanded emotion of him, some answer to the immediate softening in her, but he was dumb. He knew how to voice his desire for Esther, how to demand, to plead, or insist; that was trodden ground and familiar, but the child meant nothing to him but a sense of embarrassment. His answer was confused, bald.

"Yes—she told me. I guessed when I saw—that painting—what you'd gone through."

Esther's lips tightened, the softness fled from eyes and voice. "And you also have seen the 'Despair' and understood?"

"Yes," Rutledge said, thickly, suddenly become inarticulate.

"It is all quite true," Esther said, stiffly, as if to move

her lips was difficult. "He painted just only the truth. He found me in that room exactly as he has painted it—quite as mad with despair as he has shown. . . . There was in him the same determination to have his will that there was in you, and for the second time I had not in me the strength or the knowledge to resist. He took us to France, and he kept me for four months—until I made him send us back. He thought he had a wonderful model—hidden away; he would paint such things as had never been, and he never painted one other thing after the 'Despair.' He went a little mad—his belief was that he could not paint without the thing he called love. He wished to be a little mad, and for the sake of his art he opened the door of hell and dragged me in to burn with him. He wished me to go mad also. To do that he must kill purity and goodness in me, take my heart in his hand and fashion it into something strange and unwomanly. He struggled with a stone-woman—a thing made of marble. He might chip and deface the surface, but he was powerless to reach within. It took him weeks to know that he had failed utterly, and then he let me go. Since then I have been better able to judge, to rely on my will. The furnace into which he drew me burned away the part of me that was all weakness, ignorance, and impulse. It welded together the small strength I possessed. I fail often—I often make mistakes—but I am no longer bewildered, and I have the courage to try again, and still again, when I fail. . . . I tell you this in the beginning that you may understand the sort of woman you come to. You come to me as if not a day had passed since the time you took me up the hillside and persuaded me to listen to you. I am no more that girl. By you I was persuaded—with him I bargained for the sake of my child. Of my wrong-doing and my weakness you and he have been the only ones competent to judge, for there have been only you two. . . . I do not speak with blame to you;

I do not cast blame on him. You acted according to your law, he according to his, and I had no law—I was without judgment and weak in will.”

“You weren’t to blame,” Rutledge declared, his utterance still thick. “I’ve known it every day for three years—it’s gone to bed and gotten up with me. I made you believe in me, give me everything you had, and then I killed you. . . . I wanted you and I couldn’t see any great harm. Only a few hours and I meant to marry you as certainly as any man ever meant to marry a woman. There was just the one blank slip in a million, and I drew it. . . . And as for Pemberton—*damn him*—he’s dead; I can’t reach him. I’ve got no right to say anything to you, or blame you—what right have I to throw stones? My blame’s for the one who’s responsible for the whole thing, and I *swear* I’ll make her pay!” His face was dark again with rage.

“She did a terrible thing, an evil thing,” Esther said, “but that does not lessen our fault.”

“*I swear that she shall pay!*” Rutledge repeated, with unchanged emphasis, “and I’ll do it through you. When you’re mistress of my house she can stand in the street.”

Esther looked at him, gravely, thoughtfully. “You came to me, then, with revenge uppermost in you?”

He sat straight with a jerk, his anger gone instantly. The pressure of his hand on her hip suddenly became a grip. “I did not. I came because I want you—just as much as I ever did. I could take my revenge through a dozen people and half a hundred institutions if I wanted to. It’s my money my mother wants. She’s wanted it in her keeping, and me out of the way, for this many a day. It’s not that, my little Lady; it’s *you* I want. . . . Esther, did you *think*—when you were my wife for a night—did you think then that I loved you? . . . You knew I did, or you would never have listened. I wanted to hold you for my own, not just for a

while, but always. It came to me that day by the river when you promised to marry me. It occurred to me then what marriage really was—and I wanted it—with you. I've never felt that same thing to any other woman. In these three years it's not my mother who has kept me from marrying, though she may think so—it was just that I didn't want any woman in that way.

“Esther, I've lived hard, I always have, but the last three years it's been worse than ever. I didn't care, and my mother stood by me and shoved me along—it's clear enough to me now. After the accident I drank more. She put the stuff under my nose, set it against my elbow. After the accident—before I could walk about—I'd get that nightmare fit, you and I standing up looking at each other and then the plunge—God! I'd crawl out of bed and drink whatever she put there for me. That's the way it went until drink was the best diversion I had. I didn't care—I didn't care what I did. And there was only one woman in all that time that I went crazy over, and that was Aleksandra. I saw her dance one night. She looks like you when she dances, but when I met her! She was no more like you than you are like me, and I've never talked to her since, though I've watched her dance dozens of times. . . . Ugh! What a life it's been! I'm sick to death of it. I want to be done with my mother, and the old state of things. If you'll keep your promise to me and marry me, we'll begin over again—not here—I hate this place—somewhere away from here. If you'll stand by me, I'll take myself in hand—I'll pull up short. That's what has brought me here, Esther—I want you to give me a helping hand. If I'm just wrapped up in loving you, I'll forget about drinking. One thing's sure, I simply *can't* go on the way I've been going. . . . We're not to blame for this interval—we'll go back to where we were when things snapped. . . . Will you do it?”

There was no command in his words, there was little of

pleading, but sheathed in each was sincerity and an urgency that was determined, settled, unavoidable. It seemed to Esther that even the movement of her lips was painful.

"You say nothing of your child," she said.

"What do I need to say? . . . She is my child, and you can tell me what you want for her—I'll do whatever you want." There was the same note of embarrassment as before.

"She has no one's love but mine," Esther said, in her heart. To him she was silent.

"Will you do it, Esther?" he asked again.

"If I loved you I should say yes very quickly," Esther answered, "but love did not live through what I have endured."

"You mean you're stone cold to me? . . . You've sat here like an image that's pulled by strings. Don't think I'm blind, or don't remember the time when you were different." He had flushed darkly.

"Will you listen and try to understand if I say to you what I really feel?" Esther begged.

"What else am I here for?"

"I think I feel to you as you say, 'stone cold'—I know no better way to express it to you—and at the same time I belong to you as much as if I were your wife. I feel more than ever so now you have come to tell me you never forsook me, and that you still love me. I cannot explain these feelings even to myself. It has been so with me from the time when, as you say, I was your 'wife for a night.'"

Rutledge studied her face intently, her wide look and firm set mouth. Under his scrutiny she paled to the lips, and the pupils of her eyes dilated. If he asked her a certain question her self-control would vanish. She would rather be torn than give Kyle's name or make any admission that pointed to him.

"That's an odd answer, my little Lady," he said, quietly. "When was it you forgot to remember me as a lover, and I became an absent husband?"

"I think it was when I read your letter to Mr. Burnham, when every hope left me—you had turned your back on the little innocent child that was yours—I think it was that. Perhaps also I had not loved you with all of myself, my brain as well as my heart, though I had thought that I did."

Rutledge had grown as white as she. "I see," he said. He took his hand from her waist, looked at it absently, then dropped it to his knee. "I don't blame you," he said, slowly, "but, you know, some way or other I counted on you. When I thought I had killed you I just took everything as it came along—women with the rest—and I've got used to drinking—hard—but this last year I've thought that if I really loved some one, and she loved me, I'd stop off. Then I got to thinking more about you, for you see you were the only girl I'd ever really cared about. If I could only have you, you would help me, but what was the good of longing for that? . . . That was why I ran after Aleksandra, but she wasn't you. Then when I saw that thing of Pemberton's I *knew* you were living—you must be. And these three days I've been hunting I've been on fire. If I found you we'd pull together, don't you see, start again. . . . And now I've found you and you've failed me."

He had lifted his eyes to her, the same look he had given his mother the night before, the glazed eye of an animal that is enraged and suffering. To Esther he seemed without father or mother, a thing astray, irresponsible, a being more wayward and helpless than Felice. The tears rose and drowned her, making the hands she stretched to his wandering and uncertain.

"Rutledge!"

"My little Lady!" he cried. He pulled her from her chair into his arms, kissing her until breath and passion were exhausted. She knelt, her head against his breast, bent to the storm, shivering as with cold.

"You are mine again, my little Lady."

"Give me a little time," she begged.

"A day—I want you. . . . Stay in my arms a little longer!"

It was the old demand repeated, an insistence that was headlong in its impetuosity. She dragged herself out of his hold, finding her chair and clinging to it. He rose quickly, and she put the chair between them.

"Rutledge, don't urge me too much—not now."

He was halted by her burning eyes and white face. "You let me take you," he said, angry and puzzled.

"I know," she answered, catching her breath, "but I want you to go away now."

"Why? . . . Do you hate me again?" he demanded. "Why do you tell me to go?"

"I want to be alone," she said, too desperately to be misunderstood. "I want only to be alone a little."

"I'm coming back—I'll not stay away—I *can't* after that. . . . If I have to go, tell me when to come back."

She brought her hands to her face, framing it, her wide eyes on the floor, like one who in a moment of panic would think collectedly.

"To-morrow," she said, looking up at him.

"*Esther!* Do you take me for a stick or a stone?" he cried, passionately. "Give me my answer now—then I'll go." He drew the chair from between them.

"This afternoon—not now," she said, hastily.

He paused, looking at her, his black brows drawn down. "I don't understand you," he said, "but—I'll wait." He turned and caught up his hat, limping to the door; then he came back to her, more slowly. "My little Lady, you'll not fail me? . . . You're my last chance." He was dead white.

"No," she said. "I shall not fail you—if you do not fail me," and as it seemed useless to question her meaning, he went.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN the early afternoon Esther waited for Rutledge.

She bent to the fire, stirring it into brighter life, for the wind had begun to scud across her skylight, laden with pricking needles of snow. On such a day the sputtering radiator in the corner was inadequate. The weather promised riot before another day, a contrast to the fleecy stillness of the morning. As the fire leapt she looked anxiously over her shoulder at the small creature who sat enthroned on the spread blanket beneath the skylight. She sat in the midst of a litter of toys, her brown hands quick-moving and active, her grave eyes intent on an uncertain tower of blocks.

"Are you cold, petite?" Esther asked, but she received no answer, for the tower was being crowned, a final effort that scattered it dismembered upon the red blanket.

Esther rose and crossed to the blanket. "Are you cold, Felice?" she repeated.

The child looked up at her gravely, a glint of gray under black lashes. "It falled down," she said, with a sigh, and then suddenly her smile of delight broke, indenting her cheeks, lifting her mobile upper lip, narrowing her eyes until they were a gleam. "It's all broken," she said, with a gesture that deprecated her very evident joy.

Her mother's smile met hers, a smile as young as her own. "Yes—but you must build it up again. Are you cold, petite?"

Felice shook her head energetically, but Esther touched her cheek and hands, and, still fearful of the draught, brought a cloak from the couch.

"Stand up, baby, so we can put this on." Felice was

bent over gathering the blocks and gave no heed. "Come, Felice," Esther repeated.

The little girl looked around and rose to her feet instantly. "No!" She faced her mother, her black brows lowered into a straight line, the haughty upper lip lifted, the brown of her cheeks darkened by anger.

"Come," Esther said, quietly.

"No!"

She was a small child, even for three years, dainty of body, clean cut of feature, and as rich and vivid in coloring as a tropical bird; black-haired, gray-eyed, warm-cheeked, only her smile and her long, heavy-lidded eyes reminders of Esther. She was quick-moving or slow as she willed, a bit of fire, a humming-bird, or a thing that might sit motionless in the sun, apparently without thought. She was of Esther's blood, and she was not; a creature that the future might make marvellous, or mar terribly. Some of these things Esther thought as she held the coat and waited patiently.

"Come, Felice."

"No!" It was a scream now, high-willed, passionate, cheeks and brow purple.

Esther studied her thoughtfully. In her many struggles with her child she always remembered what the pale sister at the convent had once said, "There is almost always reason behind this wild anger, if one but searches for it. She is wild and wayward, and leaps from control like fire, but beneath it all is reason, and a very great power to love." The reason beneath this fit of passion occurred to Esther. "We are not going away, petite, we are going to stay here all night. Etta wants the coat on you to keep the cold away while you play on the floor."

The lowered brows lifted slightly, but the mouth was still sullen, as angrily determined as ever. Esther had not reached the real reason.

"Felice, what did mother tell you when we put on the beautiful white dress?" she asked.

"You said I could go to the door when it knocked. I want to go in my dress."

"Yes, and if you put the coat on it will keep the dress all the fresher, and keep you warm also, which is what Etta wants. When the door knocks, petite must run quickly to me and we will take the coat off for I also want my baby to look well in her pretty dress. Then you can go to the door and open it."

Felice looked down at her white frock and white shoes, things of great beauty in the eyes of a convent child, bred to blue gingham aprons and stout boots, and gradually the lift of lip curved in a smile; a look answering to the one that met her across the blanket. She came over it to her mother, lightly, a dancing step that found the small spaces between the scattered blocks as unerringly as the eastern dancing girl finds stepping place on a cloth strewn with eggs.

Esther knelt and drew on the coat, her face grave again, and Felice sighed anxiously as she smoothed down the projecting frills of her petticoat. "It will scrunch them," she said, doubtfully.

"No, it will only hold the pretty ruffles down—they stand out too much," Esther returned, understandingly. "I will sit down now and build blocks also."

Felice deposited herself carefully, and Esther knew what would follow—it was an often repeated game with them. Felice would build and Esther must tell a story to fit the object. The child was quick in her choice. She brought four blocks together, making a square space in the middle. Esther wondered why on that afternoon the child had hit upon that particular story. She wondered why she had ever told it to her—only because the past was always the larger part of her consciousness.

"It's the Mōnie's hole," Felice said, glancing up expectantly. Esther sat crouched in her usual attitude, her knees drawn up, her arms clasped about them, the birthmark of a people who have sat for generations by a camp-fire, or by a bed of smoking coals in the centre of a hovel.

"Build a castle instead, petite."

"I *want* the Mōnies."

"You *want* many things, my baby—you *want* and you *want*," Esther said with sudden fire, and when the child looked up wide-eyed, questioning, she caught her to her knees in a passion of tenderness. "Felice—my petite!"

"Tell me the Mōnies, Etta."

"Kiss me—kiss me again—then Etta will. So—now—lean against my knees," and Esther told the many times repeated story, telling it as she had to Rutledge that sunlit afternoon when he lay by her side on the bed of pine needles, only adapting it to a child's ears.

"And, Etta, tell the little girl in the rock-cave, and the green prince in the river," and Esther went on spelling out the dreams of her own childhood. The knock on the door caught them still crouched on the blanket, following visions.

Felice was on her feet, a lift as light as a bird's, and Esther drew off the coat. "Go quietly, petite, and open the door," she whispered.

The child looked at her with grave eyes, and vivid cheeks. "Who will come in, mother?"

"A man who will love you by and by, my baby."

Felice walked sedately to the door, and Esther rose from her knees, and went to the fire, standing with one hand on the mantle-shelf; the color in the child's cheeks was no more vivid than the spots in her own.

Felice struggled with the door handle, and when it yielded suddenly, and the door swung wide, she lost her balance and sat midway of the threshold, almost at the feet of the tall man who stood, hat in hand, staring down at her.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, in amazement, then his fiery eye suddenly questioning went to Esther by the fire, the blanket on the floor, and back again to the face of the baby at his feet. He had no other word, but the rising blood flushed him warmly.

The child sprang to her feet and sped like a rabbit to her mother's outstretched hand, and it was Esther's voice that broke the silence.

"Come in, Rutledge."

He came in and closed the door behind him, his cheek still dark, his look a little dazed; he put down his hat and cane, and took off his overcoat. "It's growing bitter cold," he said.

He had come hot-foot, his impetuosity goaded by the vision of Esther waiting and still illusive, and now a stranger sat with them.

"You will be glad of the fire then," Esther answered, in her sweet voice. "I built it up so it burns hot."

The couch stood near, and she took its corner, drawing the clinging child into her arms, close against her breast. Rutledge took a chair first, moved restlessly, then came and sat beside her. He was flushed, uncertain, and when she lifted her eyes to him he met her look a little helplessly. The child stared at him fixedly, her warm cheek pressed to Esther's breast.

"Her eyes are like yours," he said, at last, his usually imperious tones so subdued as to be little more than a whisper.

"And the rest is all you," Esther returned, as softly. She knew that he was under a spell of embarrassment that almost choked words, and she talked on, her quaint accent pronounced, for she was speaking on a subject that was endlessly, completely interesting. "By and by when she is not so shy she will stand up and you can see her better." Esther held her hand against the child's ear that she might deaden the sound of her praise. "You will see then how pretty she

is. Her hair is so black as mine—you see it is—but it is not ugly and straight like mine, it is soft like yours and curls at the ends. She is much the prettiest child at the convent, and learns so quickly. When she speaks it is as distinctly as I speak, or you. Sister Celeste speaks so very correctly and she teaches her. I think when she grows up she will be beautiful, little and light, but like dancing fire. I think she should be taught to dance early; she is as light as thistle down, or a humming-bird.” She looked up at him, flushed, a little timid, a new Esther, but the spell of intense discomfort was still on him.

“How long has she been at the convent?” he asked, urged by a desire to say something, but incapable of deciding what it was.

“For two years—at first I must put her with the charity children, for I could not earn enough to pay. Then soon I took her away, and put her in the convent. They are kind to her there, but they have too many, and now she is older, I think and think what better thing I can do for her. I chose the Catholic church for her in the beginning for it demands obedience, and it is my belief that it is better for a woman to have faith blindly and obey law than to be left to her own will, unless it is possible for her to be taught very wisely indeed, much more wisely than I know how to teach. To take religion from a child is *fearful*; it is the one strong thing a woman has to lean upon, a thing to which she may cling when her will is weak. She may be taught to reason clearly, but in her moments of impulse it is her faith, not her reason, that will most often guide her. . . . So, at least, I have thought, and Felice is one of those to whom obedience and reverence are difficult. Yet to such the faith and lessons of early childhood mean a very great deal. I have thought and acted for her as well as was possible in my ignorance. I think if some one had judged so of me—and of you—when we were little—we would not be as we now are.”

Esther delivered her somewhat prehistoric ideas with deep conviction, and Rutledge was suddenly reminded of the girl who used to sit just beyond his reach and propound grave questions to which he had no answers. She lifted shining eyes to him now, and he did not know what to say to her. Every word she uttered was so entirely unfamiliar to him. What did he know of a child's needs? What Esther said found lodgment in him, because of his sense of outrage at the hands of his mother, but he had not distinctly formulated his grievance against Mrs. Ericson. Esther's words were strange, a language he did not know, but what she asked of him, what lay beneath her words, was plain to him. "If you love me and would have me, you must certainly prove to me that you love your child and are ready to act the part of a father," was what she demanded of him, and he had no answer for her. He was hot, uncomfortable, unable to take his gaze from the face that was so like his own, and growingly distressed by the disapprobation with which the child regarded him.

Rutledge floundered on, desperately. "Why did you call her Felice?" he asked.

"I hoped she might have the happiness I had not," Esther answered, simply.

He took his courage in both hands. "I wonder if she would come to me?" he asked.

"Will you go, petite?" she questioned, softly.

The answer was immediate, delivered under scowling brows, Rutledge's own look of anger. "No."

She squirmed and twisted in Esther's arms, demanding to be put down, and when Esther let her go she walked off with dignity, seating herself in the centre of the blanket. She looked at Rutledge over her shoulder as she went, and now she sat eying him steadily. Her dignity and access of scorn were somewhat comic, a replica of his own hot-headed child-

hood, but Rutledge was in no mood to smile. The action and the look hurt him unaccountably. The distress he felt sat oddly on him, a new sensation he did not understand; he wished intensely that he had not offended, that she would come back and look at him as she had when she opened the door to him. He had behaved like a fool, and she would always hate him. The thought was not pleasant; it hurt. For the moment he was thinking of her not in connection with Esther, but as an individual and in relation to himself.

Esther stole a look at him, for he was not looking at her, but at the child. "She is very like you when she brings her brows together like that," she suggested, gravely.

"Yes, I am afraid she is," was Rutledge's subdued answer. Then he pulled himself together; he ought to be angry at anything that scowled at him like that child. She hated him at sight—she cared only for Esther, and Esther cared for her far more than she would ever care for him. A twofold jealousy gripped him and prodded his always easily aroused temper; the mood of the morning returned to him, all of the urgency that had driven him about during the intervening hours. He turned his shoulder on the child, his expression become a very good likeness of her own. He had a new demand, a new grievance.

"You love no one on earth but that child!" he said, violently.

Esther understood him better than he knew, for she was intuitive of the hurt that underlay his sudden jealousy. Her answer had no apparent bearing on his remark. "If she knew you well she would love you even more than she loves me, I think. She is all of a little woman, and only three years old. If a man comes into her sight all women take a second place. I have watched her often. The big doctor who comes to the convent can take her from me at any time."

"If she's sure to love me, then leave that to the future,"

he urged. "I know why you wouldn't answer me this morning, Esther. You wanted her here; you sprang her as a surprise on me. . . . I tell you again that anything in the world you want for her that I can give, she shall have—but it's not fair to judge me like this." He spoke vehemently, but low, as one will in presence of a listener.

"There is no haste," Esther said, quietly.

"I will *not* live through another day like this!" Rutledge declared, desperately.

The lines came back to her forehead as she looked away from him.

"Esther," he pleaded, "listen to me. We are husband and wife, really—you and I."

He was bent low over her, unmindful now of any one else, and the touch of something soft and warm against his knee did not stir him at first. It was only when Esther looked and he saw the sudden widening of her eyes that he also looked down; the little humming-bird had come to rest at his knee. He looked down into eyes as gray-green as Esther's own, a smile as dazzling as Esther had ever given him. It faded a little under his startled lift of brow, but she held her ground bravely.

"I have on my new dress," she said. She bent a little, a movement graceful in its rapidity, and, lifting the skirt, she spread it wide for his inspection. Her eyes were agleam beneath half-lowered lashes, but the next instant she was as grave as a statue.

"It's very pretty," Rutledge replied, husky with surprise.

"Etta made it for me,"—she inclined her head graciously to Esther.

"It's beautiful!" Rutledge said, more collectedly, but with emphasis.

"I have new shoes, too." She took a step backward, displaying them to better advantage.

This was a feminine language Rutledge understood perfectly, and could answer promptly.

"I can't see them very well from here," he declared. "Come up here where I can look at them." She came with sufficient dignity, and he lifted her carefully to his knee, flushing hotly as he did so. "What a little mite," he remarked to himself, but with genuine admiration.

"The shoes is pretty?" she said, passing over the more personal remark.

"They are, and on such tiny little feet. Who gave them to you?"

"Etta. She gives me everyfing."

"May I give you something—some time?"

His question radiated her. "Some wiolets?" she asked, quickly. "Etta bringed me wiolets once."

"Yes, 'wiolets,' and other things. . . . Do you kiss Etta sometimes?"

"Yes,"—he received her brilliant smile and veiled glance,—"Etta kisses me always—when she comes."

"Would you kiss me, I wonder—now?" he asked, gravely.

She glanced up at him with her first touch of shyness, but saw in his eyes something that took away doubt, for she lifted herself to her knees and put her arms about his neck, and he held her, kissing her, very gently, as if he touched something fragile.

"You're a dear little kiddie," he said, not very clearly, and then with a boy's eagerness to cover an emotion he does not understand, he put her back again on his knee hurriedly. "See here—you know—I've something in my pocket you'll like!" and he brought out from his pocket a musical match-box and their two heads came together over it, the child's hand holding to the collar of his coat, his arm circling her. For the moment Esther was forgotten, unnecessary.

She rose softly and went into the cupboard that held her

small cook stove, and closed the door behind her. It was a narrow space, narrower than the corner in which she had found refuge over three years ago when she had fled from Mr. Burnham's office, but there was a window set above her, small and square, like the one to which she had clung then. It served her now as it had then, a something to hold to when choking for breath. The icy wind swept her wet face and lifted hands, and she gave to it some of the intolerable pain that strangled her. There was no going back now—a future of endless patience before her, and she was only twenty! And piercing through it, weighing it down, would be the hourly consciousness of a good man's pain; this day's work would demand an accounting, and very soon. . . . In twenty, no, in ten minutes she must go back and Rutledge would put the child down and take her in his arms. . . . If she could only kill the remembrance of one burning night it would make the next hour more easy. He would give her a day—two days—that would be all, and then she must complete with him the journey on which they were bound when they started down the hillside together. . . . And then she must send for Kyle to come to her!

She left the window, for her hands were too stiff to hold her up, and, going to the box that contained her little store, she dropped to it, and laying her face on her knees, her clasped hands on her head, she bent to the storm that swept over her.

It was almost midnight when Kyle came and found her sitting over a dying fire; she knew his knock, and her "Come in," freighted with its soft accent, reached him through the door.

There are moments when the usual civilities are unnecessary, the extended hand, the word of welcome; Esther simply raised her head and looked at him as he slowly crossed the room to her. There was only the glow of the fire, and the

shaded side light on her features, but her dark-circled eyes made her face so white that it gathered no warmth from the glow.

Kyle stopped directly before her, looking down into her lifted face. "You're alone at last," he said, harshly. His own face might have been marble, it was so set and white.

"Yes." She raised her hands to him, her slim fingers gripping his wrists, drawing him down beside her. "You know," she said.

"I met him in the hall when he came in to-night; I saw his face; I know that look on a man's face—the brute and the gentleman wear it alike. He had no word for me, nor I for him, though we stood elbow to elbow for hours in that damned elevator while it crawled up here. I didn't need anybody to tell me that he had been here already and had his answer. He swaggered down this passage to your door as if he owned it as well as you. . . . And I've sat up there—above you two—or walked up and down, for a long lifetime—until I knew he was gone. . . . If I had only had sufficient will I should have kept on walking up and down through the night and left you alone, but I couldn't do it. . . . Esther, when is he going to take you?"

"He has given me a day. We stay here a little time, then we go to Europe. It is his plan, and it is best."

"A day—and then that! . . . Esther, are you quite mad? While I tramped about up there I told myself that beneath all your doubt, and your distrust, you must want him just as you did in the beginning, and your sense of duty, and your guarding of my name are only unconscious pretences, an effort to deceive yourself and me—that when I came down here I'd find you frightened but happy. I've seen your face and I know better. What in God's name do you mean by doing such a thing to yourself? Don't you know—*don't you know* what you are giving yourself to? Put me aside, don't think

of me, drop me out of your life altogether, I'll bear that, but for your sake and the sake of Felice don't give yourself to that man. . . . Esther, he's utterly irresponsible—more than half the time.”

“I know what he is, Mr. Kyle, but you will remember that you do not speak to a girl who is innocent and unlearned. I have a will far stronger than his, and I am also much wiser. For all the life he has led, and the ungovernable temper that at times makes him little better than one demented, he is still an ignorant, wayward boy. Beneath it all he has the heart of a boy. He needs me quite as much as Felice—even his mother is his enemy—he has nobody. I had thought of him as probably grown into a wicked man, a little less so than his mother, and had I found him so no power could have compelled me to go to him—that would only be doing a harm to Felice——”

He interrupted her. “And are you doing the right thing by Felice now? Esther, no man who is not at heart a brute could do by you as he has done. It is only some strange freak of passion that has brought him back to you. . . . God knows I'm not urging you because I want you for myself—in these last few hours I have taken a step ahead, and left selfishness behind. I am begging you on my knees to think before you leap. You will have a husband who is a drunkard and an irresponsible, a man who has shown that he could be a brute to an innocent girl. In addition to that you will have his mother's hand against you, you and Felice, and she is no mean enemy. He will take you where I shall be helpless to reach you, to watch over you—you between those two, him and his mother! I tell you, Esther, I am sick with fear for you—you *are simply mad.*” He shook under the force of his denunciation, and grew helpless under his pleading. Only Esther's cool grip on his wrists kept him to any semblance of restraint. He had entered with set face and steady voice,

and now both voice and muscles had broken from control; he stumbled in his speech, became scarlet, shaking, inarticulate.

"*Hush!*" Esther said, making herself heard at last. "You judge naturally, but without knowledge. If you would but listen to me one *little* moment! I also misjudged him, though in my heart there was always something that made it impossible for me to believe every evil of him," and still holding him, the grip of her hands on him, Esther told of the mistake of three years. She repeated Rutledge's confessions to her almost in his own words; she described his visit of the morning briefly, and painted the scene of the afternoon, using all her gift of words to make it vivid; she hid her own feelings, and gave emphasis only to her reasons and her conclusions.

"Mr. Kyle, there is within us all, particularly in a little child, a great need, the demand for those conditions which make what we call 'a home.' The child that is denied that one great craving suffers in consequence—as long as it lives. The husband, the wife, and between them their little child—that is the real home. I wish to make for Rutledge and our petite, and for myself, that thing which neither of us has ever known."

She had struck him silent, and at the end she conquered him utterly by a dramatic dénouement that was as natural a part of her equipment as the breath she drew. "Come here," she whispered, "come here and see!" She drew him to the screen that guarded her bed, thrusting it aside with one hand, holding him with the other. "Look, do you not see!" she said, suddenly become soft-voiced. "He loves *her* also. What would you have me do but what I have done?"

The light was clear enough for Kyle to see quite distinctly the small body, a mere outline beneath white covers, the soft hair, black against the pillow, the level brows, and the black line of lashes against the pomegranate tinted cheeks, a tropical bloom caught by a wayward wind and dropped on a bed of snow.

Kyle stood a long time agaze, until his tense hands relaxed and dropped, and only then did she let him go. It was he himself who moved the screen again to its place, while she watched in silence.

"Each man must judge for himself," he said, in a low voice. He stood looking down at her, helpless before a will that surmounted his own, and a courage that held doubt and fear at bay, but above all awed by an immensity of faith which was beyond his understanding. To intrude his own needs, his own pain, at that moment, was conduct too small for his manhood to contemplate; to ask her what thought she had given him in making her final decision, to demand of her some assurance of the love he knew she bore him, appeared a thing contemptible, a truckling to utter selfishness. He could not look her in the face and do it.

His eyes spoke more than any words, and Esther bent to his hand as she had once before and, lifting it, laid her cheek against it. He turned it palm upward, framing her face, then he kissed her forehead, his lips on her hair, and her eyes.

"There is the greater part of you that neither he nor any other can ever take away from me," he said. "If I didn't know it, I wouldn't want to live. . . . You will pass through more fire—you have chosen the pathway that leads through it, but some day you will bring all of yourself to me. You have your faith to support you; I have mine."

She had made her supreme effort, and words were not possible to her.

"I shall see you again—before he takes you away?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You promise?"

"I will come to you—you must not come here again," and then he left her.

CHAPTER XXIV

It was close to midnight when Rutledge left Esther, and in half an hour he was at his own door.

"Don't go up Fifth Avenue," he ordered his chauffeur, so they had turned into quieter streets; he did not want the sight of hotel or café, or the lighted windows of the clubs. The strain of the morning, the uncertainty of the afternoon, were over; Esther was his to take and have at an early moment. He had hunted hot-foot for three days, and now there was a certain lassitude upon him, stirred only by a great craving. It had grown steadily during the evening. When Esther had spread her simple supper for them, and he had attempted to swallow without drink, he had choked over it. The water she brought him nauseated him, and the coffee was little better. When had he sat at a meal without first tickling his appetite, and afterwards bolstering it? He had looked at the food on his plate, and Esther had said, "You are not hungry?"

"Hungry! . . . No, I have you," and he had drawn her down to his knee, but he had not told her the truth. He had evaded the truth from the beginning. He had said that drink had become his diversion, not his life. He had said if she stood by him he would take himself in hand—pull himself up short. He believed in his power to do so; had he not always done what he desired? Once before he had arrested himself, kept himself in hand for twenty-four hours, presenting himself to Madame Aleksandra with racked nerves, but undimmed faculties, and she had failed him—she was not Esther, or even a semblance of her. He had left her and gone mad for weeks, but that was because she had failed him. It did not argue that he was without the power to continue abstinent if

he had the incentive. Again and again he had proved that he could sober himself; why, if he willed it, could he not keep himself sober?

But as he sat beside Esther, with his child, a new possession, asleep near him, doubt had grown and assailed him, urging him to every lover-like extravagance in his endeavor to soothe growing anxiety. The night before he had allowed himself a little license—only a little—as a stay to his sickening sense of disgust and outrage, but to-night if he yielded he would fall headlong; the craving in him was too great to be satisfied by a sop. He had clung to Esther to the last moment she allowed, and when he came down into the wind-swept street, and thrust himself into his cab, he cursed the necessity that shut him away from her. If he might but lose himself completely, his head on her breast, the gnawing tooth within him would be stilled, and he might wake to courage. It was the wild lift and sweep of the senses that he craved, that every nerve in him ached for, that and the consequent sinking into oblivion.

As he stood on his doorstep it occurred to him that a physician might give him relief, sleep for the night, time to collect more courage, and instantly his pride rebelled. He would not go to any man and acknowledge his helplessness. As he opened his own door and was met by the warm scent of flowers and woman's laughter, it struck across his sick senses that he might seek a woman. But not without the aid of wine. Only if sight and hearing were first deadened, if features were made indistinct, and voice become only a sound without meaning, would that be a possibility, and what help would that be to him? He would already have fallen. So long as he could reason, Esther held him.

The butler took his hat and coat, and thought him more flushed than usual, the lift of his lip more pronounced, his eyes more restless. "Will you go in, sir?" he asked. "Mrs.

Ericson wished to be told when you came in—they are playing bridge, sir.”

“No,” Rutledge said, anger alight in him again at the mention of his mother’s name. “I’m going to my room.” He was in torment, and she made merry! He went on up the stairs, scowling, then stopped, and called the man to him. “James!”

“Yes, sir.”

“When they’re gone, tell my mother I want to see her.”

“I will, sir.”

Then, nerved to decision by his anger, Rutledge walked to the front window in the upper hall and, tugging at the sash, flung out into the night the key he had been fingering throughout the drive. It curved, catching a momentary gleam from a lighted window, and fell with a faint tinkle on a spot in the street that was bare of snow. In the darkness of the cab he had drawn it from his pocket, holding it, moved to drop it into the street, urged to hold it tightly until the door of his room was locked behind him, for it opened the well-stored cupboard. He had ordered his mother not to provide for him, but all and more than he wanted was at his hand. At his ring the butler would bring him anything he asked for. His act was a childish one, yet it served to assert his determination, it gave him a certain feeling of having taken a decided step. He went on to his room and waited. He must talk to his mother in the morning; why not now? Anger might help him through the night, and in the morning he would have Esther again. Let him but get through the night, take that first step, and he would be strengthened for the future. Rutledge turned his back on the cupboard, sitting with his feet to the fire, his hands unconsciously grasping the arms of his chair. They were a long time at bridge, but finally he heard the bustle of departure, the soft whirr of the limousines, and the louder clatter of a taxicab; it was one o’clock.

Mrs. Ericson found him sitting bolt upright, his brilliant eyes on the French clock on the mantle, a spot of color in either cheek. Her glance was momentary, shrewd, appraising, a leap back over past knowledge of him. She had come upon him sitting in much the same attitude, and wearing the same look, when she had hurried to him one gray afternoon in London, and what had been the conclusion? He had not had a word of explanation for her, his concentration was so complete that he had appeared only superficially conscious of her arrival. From after events she learned that he was mastering himself in order to go to Aleksandra clear-headed, clean-minded as it were, and from that interview he had returned little better than an automaton, gray-cheeked, dull-eyed, slow of speech, and for weeks he had remained so, until he made of himself a senseless log. If Aleksandra was working another spell upon him, she would discover it in this interview. If the dancer had set him the task of sobering himself completely before consenting to marriage, a highly probable supposition, there was the remainder of the night in which to forestall her. She had been in doubt in the morning, but she knew from the first glance at him that now he was quite sober. One swift look had been enough for observation, the moments occupied in seating herself sufficient for conclusions.

"I wish you had come in, Rutledge," she began, brightly. "Every one was disappointed. Nobody but Margaret and Floyd seem to have seen you since you came back."

Rutledge had risen rather stiffly, offering his chair by a gesture only, but she was apparently unobservant of his silence, a little flushed from her run upstairs, and entirely oblivious of the scene in the morning. Mrs. Ericson always appeared infantile in any chair she took, and she sat now perched on the very edge of the great cushioned seat Rutledge had vacated. She wore her silver-spangled gown, close bound to the ankles, her small feet outstretched to the fire, and

Rutledge watched her in silence from his position against the mantle, his brilliant look become glowing. She met it half smiling, a gravity edged with mirth.

"I've had other things to think of," he returned. "Madame, I intend to close this house to-morrow."

"What in the world for?" she asked, briskly. "Oh! I suppose Madame Aleksandra——"

He paid no attention to her remarks, but straightened a little, as he delivered his blow. "Esther Rieloff and I will be married to-morrow. We'll not need this house—nor *you*."

It took her between the eyes, clean driven, well planted, dazing her, turning her chalk white, bringing her hands to the arms of the chair for support, and her son's pent fury broke forth as he stood over her.

"I can't curse you," he said, thickly, "for you are my mother. If among the other disclosures that have been made to me I'd learned that you were not, I'd feel better. Madame, I know Mrs. Rieloff's story from *start to finish*. You hood-winked a clever man for seventeen years, and did me a great wrong in doing it—you played your game of chance and missed out on it. Gustav Rieloff was your husband, Madame, my father never was, and I have the misfortune to be your son."

She received the statement without wincing; she had lived with the actuality of it too long.

"A tale she can't prove, and one you will want to keep very still about," she said, in tones as colorless as her face. "I know how Bland's will is worded; I've had the best advice in New York on that point long ago. The money's safe enough in any case—no one on earth can touch it."

"And that's the way you take it then," Rutledge returned, his violence suddenly touched by bewilderment. "That's the first thought you have when your son tells you that he knows what I know about you! What are you, anyway? Money,

money, money, always *money*. I never thought about the money at all last night when that street woman told me your story—I was just deadly ill—sick at the thought that I belonged to you—until I began to think of Esther and got angry. I have to be angry to think of you at all. . . . It can be proved, that story, if any one wants to hunt up records. Records of marriages and divorces aren't destroyed, though letters may be bought at a good price and put into the fire. But who wants to prove it? You, or I, or Esther? We are the only people who know. Mrs. Rieloff's gone, and Mr. Rieloff's what you helped to make him, a poor childish old man. . . . It isn't that worries me, Madame, it's just that it's *true*, and that you've *outraged me*."

She tapped the arm of her chair, impatiently; the color was creeping back into her cheeks. She had had time to think a little, to plan; the more he talked, the more he exhausted himself the better; her house of cards was about her ears, but there was just a possibility that she might emerge unharmed.

"I know Mrs. Rieloff. She told her story in her own way, and I deny it; it isn't true," she said, coolly.

He was back to white heat again. "And I repeat, Madame, that it *is* true—I have Esther's knowledge as well. Mr. Rieloff told her every circumstance, only he never called you by the name he knew you had no right to bear, Ericson. Otherwise, Esther would have known who you were, and have guessed who I was when she first met me. It was Mrs. Rieloff who told her only a short time ago that my mother was the woman Mr. Rieloff was always agonizing over and talking about, the woman who had once been his wife. Esther told me the whole history this evening and word for word it was the same as Mrs. Rieloff's, only Esther knows it more fully, because she had it from Mr. Rieloff, and not gathered mainly from your letters to the old man. No wonder you paid to

get them back, when any one who read them could put together the story that woman and Esther told me. And you talk of denying it! I wish it could be denied, now that I have a child of my own. But there's no going back of the facts.

"Mr. Rieloff married you when you were eighteen up in that little town in Canada. He taught for a time in the same school where your father taught, and he was twice your age. All that's only a matter of record. Your father was poor as most teachers, and Mr. Rieloff had a little income that made him independent, so I suppose that was the reason you married him. He was just a visionary German who knew books better than anything else, and was mad over you. He brought you to this country, to California, and there you met people who really were rich. I suppose that was a revelation to you of exactly the things you had always wanted. You played with a man who in the scandal that followed turned his back on you, and the whole thing drove Mr. Rieloff out of his head. If he had loved you a little less it would have been better for him all the way through, but he was the kind that has a conscience, and principles, and a sense of responsibility.

"Esther says he was a good old man. He went insane with trouble over you away back at that time. He divided his money with you, and left you. He went up to Alaska on some lonely botanical expedition, and you took his money and saw the world a bit.

"It was then you met my father. You had come as far east as Denver, and you stayed there because my father was there. You had told him that you were a widow, a plausible little story, and you soon learned that he was the kind of man to whom a woman can't tell two stories—not when he is serious—and my father wanted to marry you. You had told your lie and you had to stick to it. Knowing my father as I do I can see just how it was with you. He had already

made money, and a woman as keen as you would know at first sight that he was only in the beginning of his fortune. You wanted him badly, and you held him off as long as you could, but he wasn't the sort to wait long on any woman.

"Then you had two letters from Mr. Rieloff. In the first he said he was coming back to you, and you two would start afresh, that he had gone through hell since he left you, and there was nothing for him but to come back. The next letter came only a short time afterwards. He said he was ill with fever and he knew he would die, that the man who nursed him would write to you when he was gone. You waited a little for that letter that never came, and then you married my father—that's on the records, too. You just gambled on chance—and missed out."

Rutledge spoke more quietly. "I can understand that act of yours better than any other thing I know of you, for you gave the same spirit to me—nothing matters as long as one wants a thing. With you for a mother what wonder—but what is the use! . . . It was over a year later that Mr. Rieloff searched you out in New York. My father had made his start here, and I was a baby. At first he wanted you to come back to him. You go to Bland Ericson and confess, and then embrace poverty? No, indeed. You set me up as a bulwark. An injury to an innocent child! Mr. Rieloff was the kind to be moved by that, but you had a troublesome time of it until the old man fought down his own wishes and proposed that he set you free so you could go to my father, and tell him the truth, and be lawfully married. He wasn't a bad sort, that old man. You promised, for you would at least be free of him then. He went out west somewhere and got his divorce—that's on the records too, Madame—and came back to you. You told Mr. Rieloff then that you didn't dare go to my father, for he would turn you off, and separate you from me, which would kill you. I was a great convenience

to you, until my father strapped his money on my shoulders! . . . You had your way, and Mr. Rieloff spent his time agonizing over your condition, for the old man had a conscience. He stayed at your doorstep, though, close at hand in case exposure should come from some other source. He was queer at times, and he got the fixed idea that when Bland Ericson turned you off he would take you in. He went into the slums to live, for he had a little more money than those people, and could do for them. Then he adopted Esther, and for her sake he went out near Staunton Hill, but he wrote to you often, and because you were afraid that he'd lose his mind entirely, and do some wild thing, you felt you had to answer his letters. What a life!" His anger had settled into utter contempt.

But there was a field he had not explored yet, more tinder for the fire she meant to keep burning as long as possible.

"Out of whose glass house are you throwing stones?" she sneered.

He flared on the instant. "And whose fault is it that I am what I am? The first time I was drunk who was it who treated me as if I had the right at last to call myself a man and a good fellow? Who kept the stuff under my nose all the time? And the women! Did you ever warn me, or advise with me, or tell me what a good girl was like? Not you! You manipulated me for ten years, and have tried to smother everything in me that was decent, but you didn't quite succeed. I was trying to remember last night if ever in all my life you had given me a clean bit of advice, or an iota of moral support. When I was sixteen I committed my first folly, and was shamefaced over it, like any other decent boy, and you only smiled and told me if I must be foolish not to let the whole world know about it. I've heard all Margaret has to say, and in the face of other things I know it's true. There are lots of different ways of committing

murder, and you chose the ugliest, for you aimed to kill the good in me first, and the rest would follow naturally enough. If there were anything amusing in it, I might laugh at the pig-headed stupidity with which I held on to my money, in spite of your skilful urging. I didn't even guess you wanted it! . . . Madame, you have played yourself out and must go. . . . I don't want to talk about Esther. I don't want to feel that I could strike a woman. How could you do such a thing! The deliberate lies you told were sickening enough, but to turn her out on the street—with the child—why, good God! *You're not human. I can't talk about it!*

“And these three years—with me—how has it been with me? I might have forgotten Esther if I had not been so sure I had killed her. That fixed her in my brain like a raw spot that wouldn't heal, so I kept on thinking of her. . . . You never suspected until Aleksandra came along, and I understand now what a fine fright you were in when I appeared here. You thought I was after Aleksandra, but you knew that it was the memory of Esther really that possessed me, and that both Esther and Mrs. Rieloff were here—I might come across them any time. . . . I wonder what it's like to live as you've lived for twenty-seven years, suspicious of every shadow, discovery hanging over you night and day, your wits at work every minute. Esther said to-night that if you were normal that in itself was punishment enough. Perhaps you have gone insane after twenty-seven years of it. . . . It was a terrible lot of hard work for thirty thousand dollars—no, twenty—I forgot Mrs. Rieloff had ten. You are quite welcome to your earnings, Madame.” He ended breathless and panting.

During his outburst she had been thinking, thinking steadily, her round eyes unmoving, the color warm again in her cheeks. She had determined on her course. She attempted no extenuation—she was far too wise to waste time.

If she could drive Rutledge beside himself, exhaust him still further, he would go to whiskey for comfort; he could not resist. It was her last chance. Let him become helpless—one day, two days—and possibly she might have her will; she did not follow her tortuous thoughts further. She had calculated coolly, weighed possibilities accurately. She rose and put the table between them, leaning over it a little, looking across at him.

“So you propose to marry Esther Rieloff to-morrow?”

“I do.”

“And Robert Kyle? Will he permit it?”

“Robert Kyle! What concern is it of his?”

“She is his mistress.”

The ripple of expression that crossed his face before the blood flooded it did not escape her. He faced her across the table. “I’d kill the man who said that!”

She laughed. “You poor fool, Rutledge! . . . Why it was to his office she went—his and Burnham’s—when she came here after you three years ago. Robert met her and was mad over her. He had a search for her afterwards, but he found her finally, and for the last six months he has kept her below him there in the Sixteenth Street house. You didn’t know he lived there, did you? It’s all been done very quietly. She did some illustrating and what not, *but he has supported her.*”

“Will you be quiet!” Rutledge demanded, furiously.

“Yes, when I’ve had my say—you have had yours,” she retorted, shrilly. “Your Esther is Kyle’s mistress. Go to him and see if he will deny it. I tell you, Rutledge, he is *mad* over her, and he *hates* you. She will leave him, of course, for a husband and money. . . . Oh, you may order me to keep still, but you *shall* listen! . . . Go to him in the morning, ask him if he used—if he used Gustav’s, Mr. Rieloff’s name in order to settle an income on her. A hundred

dollars or so a month from Gustav Rieloff! Why, he hasn't a cent, except a small annuity, and I know it better than any one else. Did she mention Robert Kyle's name to you? I'll wager she did not, and I know even the janitor in the house can tell you that Robert has spent——"

"If you won't go I will," Rutledge said, on his way to the door, but she was quicker than he, and before he could close it on her, from the threshold she sped the last drop of venom from her forked tongue. "Before you are married go to a doctor and ask him why you drag one foot about after you. Rheumatism, Carlier told you in Paris, because I told him to say so—that I would tell you the truth myself—that you couldn't bear the shock. I saved you a few months of despair by not telling you. Ask any specialist here and he'll tell you it's a thing that has been coming on for three years—a soft spot in your brain. In a year you'll be helpless," and from the hall, retreating with her to her own room, came her taunt, "If I can't enjoy Bland's money, neither shall you."

"In a year you'll be helpless. . . . If I can't enjoy Bland's money, neither shall you." The sentences repeated themselves over to Rutledge as sounds visualized by sudden shock, a crimson writing on the wall, blood-red markings on the pale carpet; wherever his eyes turned they were there.

He had flung the door to, shutting out the horror of her, deadening her words. He had stood with his shoulder against it, panting, shaking, holding doubt and fear at bay, his anger potent enough for a time. As long as anger braced him he stood upright, then when doubt crept in he was driven to movement, a limping, hurried, tramping up and down, but when fear came he made his way to a chair and sat with hunched shoulders. His first blind anger was gone, so also was the remembrance of Kyle's cold eye and Esther's white lips; it was terror alone that gripped him now, a

numbing, sickening realization more dizzying than actual nausea.

"In a year you will be helpless." He questioned the truth of it only vaguely, for there was a traitor within him that had instantly granted its probability. He knew perfectly why he had not returned to the little Frenchman who had eyed him so closely, examined him so carefully, and laid utterly impossible commands upon him. He had found it difficult to control his anger at the decided orders he had received, and had taken a certain satisfaction in direct disobedience, yet there had been a haunting fear in him from that day. He perversely denied himself no indulgence, but there would come days when he wished intensely to rid himself of the craving that had become an incubus.

Rutledge had never been given to introspection, or wasting time in regrets for the past, but it was then that the recollection of Esther became more vivid, linking itself to his constant craving for a delirium of the senses. If love were his it might satisfy his restless misery of mind and body. With the curious obstinacy of the abnormal he had brooded on Esther, their brief love and its tragic ending, endowing her with all his restless craving demanded, his imagined want of her only increased by the circumstances that made its satisfaction impossible.

Rutledge had passed well into the childish regions of unreason, mourning for a thing because it was unattainable. Aleksandra had crossed his sky like a meteor, and brought him as little satisfaction. Then by strange chance he was granted his wish. Esther was his again, and he endeavored to substitute love for the craving for intoxication that possessed him. Rutledge could not have put his intention into words; it had been vague to him, the outgrowth of a weakness that looked to some extraneous strength to lean upon, but it had been at the root of his demand upon Esther.

In his first seeking of her, in his entire life of self-indul-

gence, in his continued need of her and his immediate demand upon her when chance brought him to her again, he was absolutely true to his inheritance and upbringing. In all his universe there was no creature existent but himself, his desires, his necessities, his sufferings, and now his despair. In the flashlight of his mother's unspeakable revelation, Esther became unreal, without substance; his anger at his mother had changed into horror of her, and that in its turn became a shadow, a thing of no moment. He sat alone with his terror, he, Rutledge Ericson, facing the Rutledge Ericson that was to be. No longer than a week ago he had sat in his steamer chair and listened with a curious fascination to the history of a shrunken creature who had once been a man. It was a history that had a parallel in his own. He, Rutledge Ericson, with his bounding blood and wild moments, become *that!* His only asset had been his animal vitality; his potentiality lay in that. His money had been a power, but only as it ministered to his cravings. For this new Rutledge Ericson that his imagination was sufficient to create, his money would buy a soft bed and attendance, that was all.

He sat through moments that were hours in contemplation of the certainty, the inevitableness of this strange Rutledge Ericson with which he must make close acquaintance. With the morning light he would go to some learned man who would tell him that shortly he would no longer be a man; that helplessness would creep upon him, as it had upon the creature on the boat, or descend suddenly as it had on another he had known. He did not doubt his mother's statement, the longer he considered the more certain he was. He had sat long enough now to think as well as feel. When he received his sentence in the morning he would be put under bonds, such bonds as the Frenchman proposed, only grown more stringent. He would become a prisoner in his own house, with not one living being who loved him.

It had never consciously troubled him that he was not

loved as most sons are loved. Until he was alive to his own needs, a desire to master the incubus of drink, it had never even troubled him that no woman loved him unselfishly, as Esther had loved him. Women looked upon him as he did upon them; to men he gave no thought whatever save as they joined with or had part in his pleasures; his servants waited upon him well because they were well paid, and the love of a child was a myth, even the origin of which was vague in his mind. There would be not a living creature who loved him. He woke a little from despair to think of Esther. From his abyss of wretchedness he thought of her wistfully, numbly conscious of Kyle's cold eye and of her quiet submission to his own caresses. She had passed quickly over the relation of her history, answering when he questioned, but were there not many interstices Kyle or some other may have filled, and were it so great blame to her? She had said of Pemberton and himself, "There have been only you two," but it made very little difference now whether she spoke the truth or not; she was a woman of passionate intensity, as he had reason to know, and such do not cling readily to infirmity.

He judged Esther as he judged himself—the feeble and suffering had no part in his universe. The woman of large tenderness was beyond his conception. He would be utterly alone; he would be no more than a child in unloving hands; what patience would *he* have with the shadow of a man? It would be a slow waiting for death—very slow; a thing for which he had no courage whatever. He heard his mother's constant suggestion, "One can always decide whether to live or not, so why worry!" The thought lifted his shoulders a little now. He could still walk, yes, and use his hands as well as his brain. . . . He pondered for a time, his mind grown clearer, his judgment less under the dominance of fear. He even planned. . . . He would learn his fate early,

by the first light of morning, and afterwards, when he knew the truth even more certainly than now, he would clear his house and draw his testament, the one weapon of revenge left him.

There was one creature on earth that belonged to him, blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh; out of all of his mistaken life there was left him only that satisfaction. A little child, one so very little, could not lie, and she had gone to sleep in his arms, refusing to go to Esther. . . . He pondered for another space, his look less ashen. There had been tens of thousands who had met death on shorter notice than he; he might have months yet before helplessness crept upon him; the creature on the steamer knew his fate long before he was utterly disabled. . . . When he had cleared his house and put it in order, he would not sit down and wait; there was nothing to restrain him from a week, a month, of all he could crowd into it. With the inevitable before him why endeavor to master craving, why call upon will? He would save it all for the moment when he willed to make an end. . . . He need not deny himself now. . . . If no key in his room opened his cupboard, the telephone at his elbow would bring a cab to his door, and he could go elsewhere. He would be very careful that he might wake clear-headed enough to act, but for the remainder of the night he could have oblivion. The desire clutched him like a living hand, bringing the blood to his temples, lifting him to his feet. He was dizzy from lack of food and the strain following upon shock, but he could stand, and in a moment walk. His eye was eager, his hand unsteady, his gait uneven, but he was able to minister to overwhelming desire.

For a long hour Mrs. Ericson had sat close to her slightly open door, listening, intent, unwearying. She watched over a house gradually sunk into the immense silence of the dead

hours. The clock in the room behind her ticked loudly, at longer and longer intervals the quiet of the sleeping street was stirred, and at a greater distance was the murmur that is never still, but the sound of steps, the stir of conscious living, was gone. Her hands and feet were numb with cold, her head on fire.

She widened the crack of her door, and for long moments observed the wanly lighted hall. Only the night lamps burned, showing dimly the gulf of stairway, and the line of banisters that led to the upper floor. On the first floor was the same dim night-lamp, but the third floor was in entire darkness; the stair-railing led up into a black dome. With the acuteness of guilt she wondered who had turned out the upper light—it was burning earlier in the night. Anyone who looked down from above would stand in darkness and be able to distinguish a shadow made distinct from other shadows by movement. But who in all that great house was there to watch, and why? She crept into the hall by stages, a moving and halting gloom, only a little deeper than the universal shadow that had no movement. With infinite caution she reached the foot of the stairway leading up into blackness, and turned off the pale night-light. She crept into the shadow of the wall quickly then, and stood motionless, listening, for she was not in entire darkness as she had intended. The shade of one window was thrust high, the window Rutledge had lifted earlier in the evening, and a fading moon looked palely in upon shadows grown suddenly more dense, outlining a little more sharply the edge of light about Rutledge's door. Mrs. Ericson's eye shifted to the dome of darkness above her, to the lower stairway, to the moon-lighted window, but the only sound that stirred the brooding quiet was the breathing of the wind against the window-pane, a sound not loud enough for a whistle, a little higher than a whisper. It came direct from the throat of the

Ice King, breathing on the window, dimming it with slowly collecting crystals; the hand of Implacable Cold was on the city, more close gripping than the violence of a blizzard.

Mrs. Ericson crept along in the shadow of the wall, following it until she knelt at Rutledge's door, her ear against the line of light, ever tense in the strained effort of hearing, and it came to her at last, after a period of stretched attention—the clear tinkle of glass against glass—and in the next moment it came again. She lifted herself, then, dodging again for the shadow, reached her own door. Back again in her dark room she searched for the couch-cover, and, wrapping it about her, sat in her half open doorway, again listening, intent, unwearied. She did not stir until the dying moon faded from the window, and the whisper of the wind had sunk into the silence of the deadest hour of night, the hour before the first touch of gray morning. The hallway was a well of darkness now, easy to cross when guided by the line of light about the opposite door. Her groping hand found the door-handle, turning it gently, testing it softly, a pressure inward that yielded a crack of light widening gradually into a brilliancy that bathed her from head to foot, a small glittering figure, poised for one uncertain moment, then shut away quickly from the wall of darkness on the edge of which she stood.

Rutledge sat hunched and sunken in his great chair, his face dropped so low upon his breast as to be entirely in shadow. One purple hand, blood-charged until it was swollen, hung limp over the arm of his chair, suggesting a relaxation too utter for normal sleep. His chest lifted and fell regularly with labored breathing, a whistling note edging its hoarseness. She came to a stop directly before him, the border of her glittering skirt almost touching the sole of his inbent foot. How often in the last three years she had stood and looked at him in the same way, the same thought in her eyes, the power to accomplish near at hand! Fear and the

shrewd estimate of danger had always withheld her, and there had been chance on her side as well; each day of reckless dissipation brought the inevitable a little nearer, and until this hour she had been constrained by caution to compass her ends by devious and obscure means. But to-night, urged by immediate necessity, she had taken a step forward in her tortuous thoughts. She lifted her head, intent for a moment on the whisper of the wind at the windows, on the windows themselves. She had been sitting in a warmed house, and even then she was numb with cold. Her eyes came back to the figure in the chair.

The glare of light overhead revealed every detail, the swollen veins in his down dropped hands, the white line of parting in his dark hair—how like his father. Her mouth lifted, slantwise, its expression made too terrible by blue lips and the deep clefts on either side to be called a smile; it emphasized too strongly the sunken cheeks of age. Her round eyes looked from wrinkled lids, youth perishing under the crust of unsatisfied old age. It was the pitiless light looking upon a withered soul.

She touched nothing, came no nearer, only stared for moments that might be counted, then turned aside to the windows. There were three, close by, one within an arm's reach. Working quickly, deftly, from behind lace curtains, she unlatched and lifted the sash of each, opening them wide to the inrush of air that stung her bare arms and caught at her breath. One window grated harshly, and she stood for a time listening, but the house was still. She cast no second look at the huddled figure, not until the open door framed her again; then it was a sweeping glance that circled the room, a moment only, before she shut herself out into the blackness of the hall.

CHAPTER XXV

ESTHER had pleaded for the morning as her own, and Rutledge had consented only when he had received her promise to be married in the afternoon. They were to have a few days in seclusion, somewhere in the city, and then they would take Felice and go to Italy. Rutledge was firm in his determination not to live in America, and Esther had acquiesced almost without comment. It mattered little to her where they were; she would have Felice with her, and it would be better if the ocean lay between her and Kyle. For the sake of Felice and their new life together they should go as far away from old associations as possible.

When she took Felice back to the convent, the child immediately made Sister Celeste her confidant. "Wutledge is going to give me wiolets too," she said, with her grave eagerness; "he kisses Etta often, and he kisses me too," and Esther told the pale Sister and the Mother Superior of her decision.

She said to them as she had to Kyle, "He was to me my husband—and he loves the child."

The Mother Superior spoke briefly, as of a thing that admitted of no question. "You have done right, my child," but the pale Sister studied the girl's white face and shadowed eyes. "Without sacrifice there is never the perfect peace," she said, softly, and Esther went away quickly to hide sudden tears.

She carried the benediction back with her to a room filled with recollections. "Without sacrifice there is never the perfect peace." She had travelled a long road before her feet had led her to that Gateway of Truth. The pale Sister's words had reached to that innermost place where not reason

only, or feeling alone, sat as judges, but faith also ruled. It was the place to which she had always carried Kyle's arguments and his pleadings.

The long morning followed, crowded with the hundred trifles incident on hastily made plans. There were orders she must cancel, the newspaper offices from which she must resign, and last of all the packing of her handful of possessions. At two in the afternoon she moved about in a room stripped even of its rug. As long as a single article remained that she could handle, pack away, that served to keep her active, a call upon effort, she succeeded in holding a consuming desire at arm's length. Finally there remained of her possessions only a pile of papers and an armful of wood. Even with that she could dally a little longer. She knelt at the hearth and lighted a fire, piling the wood upon it, burning each paper separately, eking out every moment of activity. Rutledge must come in a moment, there would be a knock at her door, and she would be saved that dreaded space when she must sit and think—as she had in the night.

Half an hour passed, and the wood on the hearth blazed high; there only remained the skylight to be darkened, but her tired will refused to turn that last leaf in her page of remembrances. The only seat offered her was the folded rug beneath the skylight, and she went to it finally, sitting with her back to the fire, her arms about her knees, looking up at a sullen sky. The day had dawned clear and biting cold, but afternoon had hidden the sun behind a gray blanket, a slight moderation that only added to discomfort, for dampness found the very marrow and rasped the throat. There was no uplifting power in that sullen sky; she must find strength within herself.

The telephone stood on the table by her side; a lift of her arm, a moment of waiting, and she might hear Kyle's voice, a word only before she must go to the door. All morning

she had struggled with the longing. He had yielded to her the night before, but she did not have his sanction; he had simply drawn aside and ceased to oppose her will. If in this last hour she could only have one word of better understanding from him! But she dared not call him to her, she must go on without it. . . . Was he above her, or sitting in his office? How was he spending that wedding day of hers? She wanted his voice, a word of kindness at this last moment; but was it not in reality her desire to hear again from him an assurance of his love that would serve to lessen a torment she had hoped was killed? The closer she came to the final putting of herself away, the stronger it grew. Who was the woman who would give him comfort, teach him to forget her—not altogether, not that, his kisses were still too fresh on her eyes—but some woman there would be—in time? Perhaps the woman whose face graced his mantel-shelf—some one he would not need to hide or blush for. . . . Even at this last moment she could go to him, own herself conquered; she would have love from him, and the sanction of his judgment as well. . . . And at this last moment, after she had given herself up to Rutledge, he kept her waiting. . . . The blood swept up in her, choking her, drowning her; she clung to her knees, pressing her breasts to them until the pain helped her back to reason. . . . How often in the last weeks had she struggled out from overmastering desire, and dropped her head spent, as she was now; she had thought herself stronger than this. . . . If Rutledge would only come! It was this sitting and waiting that had unmanned her. If he were helpless like Felice, a child that asked only for care, tenderness, but he would come and lay the hand of possession upon her, her master, and at the same time an irresponsible child—it was his knock now at her door!

Esther rose instantly, caught back into calm by an exertion of will that took her without hesitation to the door.

She opened it upon a tall, fair woman muffled to the cheek in fur, and at her shoulder stood Kyle.

It was the woman who introduced herself, deliberately, as if speaking was always an effort. "I am Margaret Acres, and I asked Mr. Kyle to bring me—he knew how to find you."

It was the girl of the photograph on Kyle's mantel-shelf. Esther knew before she heard her name, but this was no girl, this pallid woman with her tired voice.

"Please come in," Esther said, and the three stood within the door. The grief in the woman's pale eyes, the red of recent weeping that made the lids heavy, called for gentleness as well as brevity. Esther had met Kyle's look for a moment, and did not know what it was she found there. He was so white as to be almost gray, his lips firm set.

Margaret Acres spoke again. "I am an old friend of Rutledge Ericson, Miss Rieloff, and that is the reason I have come——" She paused and looked at Kyle.

"Tell her," he said, briefly.

"Rutledge is—is fearfully ill—at his home—and I made out that he wanted you——"

"Yes?" Esther questioned, scarcely above a whisper. She stared at the woman, her lips apart.

"He is conscious," Margaret Acres said, her voice suddenly gone.

"Tell her from the beginning," Kyle said, harshly. It was the huskiness of strong feeling that Esther knew well, and her wide look went to him again.

Margaret Acres continued more clearly. "Rutledge came home late last night, and there was a fearful quarrel with his mother—about you." There was a bitterness in her pronunciation of the "you" that struck on Esther's strained senses, a woman's instant reading of another woman. "He drank in the night—he drinks terribly sometimes—and this

morning he was found sitting in his chair—paralyzed. . . . They thought at first he was frozen to death; his windows were open. The man who found him, the butler, came to me and I made his mother let me see Rutledge—and I talked to the doctor. After hours we found what it was he wanted—it was you—your name he was trying to say—and his eyes—until we understood what it was he was trying to say——” She broke off, shivering in her furs.

“Tell her the whole truth,” Kyle repeated. “She will have to know it.”

Margaret Acres moistened her lips and went on. “The butler, James, saw Rutledge when he first came in last night, and thought he looked excited and angry. He heard some of the quarrel afterwards—he heard Mrs. Ericson when she raised her voice, and from the upper landing he saw her when she came out of Rutledge’s room. He was uneasy then about Rutledge and watched for every noise. Later in the night he saw Mrs. Ericson go into Rutledge’s room again, and he was on the stairway, almost at Rutledge’s door, when she came hurrying out. He has confessed to me that he heard the lifting of a window, though he didn’t guess at the time what it meant, but he saw Mrs. Ericson’s face and it frightened him so he didn’t sleep. He is a timid, nervous man, but he is honest and truthful; I know, for he was our butler before my father died. He was only a servant, suspicious and frightened of he didn’t know what, until he brought his courage to the point of going to Rutledge’s room, but that was not till daybreak. Then he went and knocked, and before Mrs. Ericson reached him he had opened the door and gone in and found Rutledge sitting frozen. Mrs. Ericson talked and explained as she always does, plausibly, and was in wild haste for a doctor, but James came to me. He knew I was Rutledge’s friend, and that I would believe him and do what was best.”

"And Rutledge?" Esther asked, scarcely above a whisper.

"He lay in a stupor for hours, and when he became conscious he began trying to say your name. He is almost entirely paralyzed and can—scarcely speak. That is the trouble——" She stopped, unable to go on.

Esther had not moved her shining eyes from the other woman. Her look of horror had gradually melted into brimming tears, and when they fell a light had taken their place that softened every feature.

"And he wants me?" she said.

Kyle looked away from her for the first time, his eyes travelling vaguely about the denuded room. Then he looked again at her.

"He tried to say your name so long—it was fearful—and when he had said it we were helpless—the doctor and I—until he said, 'lawyer' and 'Kyle.'" Margaret Acres spoke more distinctly. "Then I came to Mr. Kyle, and he brought me here. He knew what Rutledge meant—he told me you and Rutledge were to be married to-day."

Esther turned and spoke to Kyle, not Margaret Acres. "I shall go—now," she said, clearly, and Kyle answered her only by a look.

Margaret Acres saw the look. "He is not dying," she said, sharply. "He will live a long time, though he may always be helpless—like this—like a baby that must be lifted and helped. It would have been better if he had gone to sleep in the cold!" The exclamation held a note of bitterness too intense to be hidden.

Esther turned her head and looked at her over her shoulder, steadily. "Is it not the more reason he should have near him those he loves—and those who will care for him always tenderly? Therefore I go. . . . To the dead it matters nothing—we need not speak of that." Her quaint accent was the more pronounced because of the quiet decision *of her manner*. "I shall go in one little minute."

She had turned her eyes again to Kyle, and Margaret Acres marked the steady look she gave him, and the answering look she received. She watched Esther narrowly when she went for her hat and coat, fiercely observant of the slim figure in its trailing black gown, the droop of the wide, heavily lashed eyelids, Esther's full lips, set so firmly that they pouted like a determined child's, a child's face bearing the shadows of twice its years. Esther stood under the skylight, arms uplifted, pinning her hat with hands made uncertain by haste, and the light etched each detail of face and figure clearly. She came back to them tugging at her coat, and Kyle took it from her, helping her with it.

"Bring a scarf—your veil—something for your neck," he urged. "The cold is frightful."

She obeyed him without answer, a swift turn, a lithe movement, controlled even in its haste. She bent to her packed trunk, unlocked it, and, dragging out a long veil, came back to them. "I am ready now," she said to Margaret Acres. "Can we go quickly?"

"I have a taxi," Margaret Acres answered, curtly, and turned to the door, but Kyle stopped Esther.

"Put it on here," he said, in a very low voice, and as he wrapped it about her the waiting woman at the door saw his hungry look search every feature of the girl's white face, asking of the wide eyes a question, of the close-pressed lips a caress, the unconscious hunger and thirst of love, revealed in this moment of farewell. In Esther's lifted eyes was a look that laid her heart bare.

"He is helpless—like a little child—with no one to love him," she said, as low as he, and as if she answered a question. "I wish to go very quickly—to him."

"Yes, you are right to go," he said, hardly above a whisper; at last Esther had received her longed-for word of sanction.

The slow elevator carried them down in an unbroken silence that held until Kyle handed them into the waiting cab. He stood then hat in hand, his eyes still on Esther.

"If you need me—if he wants me—send me word at once," and then his look, full of a man's helplessness, went to Margaret Acres. "Try and show her a little womanly kindness," he said, with a motion that indicated Esther. "She's chosen the hard road because she has more faith and courage than you and I. Above all, keep that damned woman's hand from her. I will come the instant I'm needed."

Margaret Acres nodded, her pale eyes clouding. "Tell him to make time," she said. "I shall send you word."

They whirled around the corner into Fourth Avenue, and for the space of some blocks Margaret Acres kept silence, studying the face of the girl beside her. Esther sat upright, holding a fold of her veil pressed to her lips, her dilated eyes unobservant of the speeding pavement. She had forgotten the woman beside her; her thoughts were elsewhere, with Felice, with Rutledge, with Kyle, intent on the new panorama of the future. When Margaret Acres spoke she started and turned, her expression startled and somewhat blank.

The vague look unloosed Margaret Acres' ill-suppressed anger. Her presence meant nothing to this girl. She had brought herself to an almost impossible act, driven by a love that surmounted every other feeling, and she was coolly set aside, her proximity even forgotten. Kyle's plea had only angered her the more. Who and what was this girl she was favoring, whose power was sufficient to hold and bend a man like Kyle?

She unsheathed her bitter tongue. "Miss Rieloff, before I take you to Rutledge I want to tell you something—I have to—even if I speak plainly. . . . Last night James overheard Mrs. Ericson say this, 'Your Esther is Kyle's mistress. Go to him and see if he will deny it.' . . . I saw you look at each other, a little while ago, there in your room, and when we

left him just now. The truth's safe with me, but I want it." The pallid woman was become suddenly scarlet.

The fire leapt up in Esther's eyes, edging the pupils with flecks of red. "And did you ask Mr. Kyle that same question?" she demanded, her head reared.

"No."

"It is well you did not so insult a good man. . . . Of Mrs. Ericson it is needless to speak. One who has murder in her heart will lie—in that statement to her son she lied—utterly. . . . It is not you or any other woman who 'takes' me to Rutledge Ericson—I go to him because my place is with him, no matter if he becomes so senseless as the stone in the street, and still lives. Even then I would go to him, and not to any other man. Mr. Kyle, who is my best friend, knows my reasons. I have his *respect*."

"You love Robert Kyle—that I know. Why do you do what you're doing, then?" Margaret Acres demanded.

"That is a matter that lies between us three—Rutledge, Mr. Kyle, and myself—and we will decide it between ourselves; it is the concern of no one else. . . . I will say something more: you saw much, you think, back there in my room, but I also learned something. You do not question me entirely because of jealousy, for you have a desperate need of me, and you wish to be certain that I go to that poor, stricken man with tenderness in my heart, and not some motive you do not understand—perhaps because I wish to seize his money as his mother has so long tried to do."

The other woman faced her also, with lifted head. "What do you mean?"

"Only that you love very dearly the man to whom you are, as you say, 'taking' me. . . . For his sake you are doing a thing that is very difficult to you," Esther answered, gently.

The blood faded from Margaret Acres' face, and she looked down without answer.

Esther continued still more softly. "Do you think it matters very much who I am, if he loves me so much that he clings to me now, and I have in me a tenderness that would guard him and care for him as lovingly as if he were a little child in my arms? . . . It is because he has had in his life no love of that kind that he is as he now is. For what is a woman's heart placed in her body, if it is not to hold that love and give plentifully of it? . . . I would quite willingly tell all about myself, if I could do so and do no harm to others, but of this you may be very certain—I have only the wish to do what is right, and the determination to take him completely out of the hands of that terrible woman." Esther was passionate now, vivid, quivering, rapid of speech.

Margaret Acres had lifted her head, and the two looked steadily into each other's eyes, the one giving of the sincerity that is the foundation of all character, the other receiving, considering, accepting.

"If you'll do all that, Esther Rieloff——?"

"It is what you wish for him, is it not?"

"Yes."

"They are things I will do."

The tears crept into Margaret Acres' eyes, lowering them. "His mother has *ruined* him," she said, at last, choking over the words. "He was dear when I first knew him. She wouldn't let a decent girl come near him. Perhaps he would never have loved me anyhow—I wasn't the kind of girl that attracted him—I'm not like you—but from the beginning Rutledge has stood up for me, and I've had no easy road to travel. . . . You don't know, you've never had to 'keep yourself in society.'" She caught herself up, biting her lips, struggling for calm, but Esther's deep look and compelling stillness were on her, opening the gates of pent feeling. "It's awful to live as I've had to live. There are plenty of others like me, and a good many go under. It's bridge debts or

something else that *must* be paid, and there's always a man who can pay easily. That's the way it is with more than one girl in our set who is trying to keep pace with money, and after that happens to her she goes about with a chain around her neck. Rutledge saved me from that. Long ago, when mother and I were in desperate straits, he brought us every cent he had—that was before he could do what he pleased with his money—and gave it to us. He was only a boy then, but he wouldn't tell his mother what he had done with it. Twice since he has helped me out when I was in extremity, and he's never asked a *thing* of me. People who hate him would say that it was only because he didn't happen to want me. I don't believe it, *I don't believe it!* I knew Rut when he was a little boy. There's *lots* of good in Rutledge Ericson, right down at bottom, only that woman plastered him over with dirt so you wouldn't know him. . . . A man like Robert Kyle has no use for Rutledge, but a woman can see deeper. You've got to have faith in the man you love or you'll go to pieces. And how I've *hated* his mother, and the women he has run with—I've hated every one of them! And all the time I've had to swim along, just able to keep my mouth above water. I've had to keep in with the people who were useful to me, and yet not let them swallow me, running their social automobiles for them, people who hadn't gumption enough to run them without help! . . . I've had to help them build their houses, and show them whom to bow to—bah! And the men whose souls I've stroked, or whose conceit I've petted—every nerve in me stretched as far as it would go, and my brain working from morning to night over just one problem—how to keep on swimming! . . . If it hadn't been for Rutledge I should have given up, taken an easier way—I've been accused of doing it more than once by women like Maud Ericson. . . . I shall have to go on now until I am gray, and he done for—lying there—Oh, I'll *smother!*"

Her hands had come from her muff, tugging at the window-strap, letting it down that she might lean forward and breathe.

Esther sat shivering with cold and pain. This was a very different history from her own, but she recognized the notes of sincerity and suffering, and offered the only comfort possible.

“I will do for him all that is in my power.”

Margaret Acres turned on her. “And you’ll fight that woman? You’ll not let her work on you?”

“I know her better even than you do,” Esther answered, quietly. “Do not fear for that.”

The training of a lifetime at the hands of those who bow lowest to the golden calf found voice. “If you marry him, you’ll command a fortune—I suppose you don’t forget that. It’s that will cut the ground from under her.” The note of triumph tinged by envy was not wanting. She was pallid and slow spoken again.

Esther drew her veil closer. “Did you think of the ‘fortune’ this morning when you told Rutledge that you loved him and would stay always with him?”

“No. . . . But how do you know? You’ll understand why I did it when you see him.”

“I know that it did not enter your mind any more than it entered mine when you told me that he was calling for me. I know almost exactly what you said to him because I know a little of the forgetfulness of love,” Esther said.

The elder woman looked at her thoughtfully, the dawning of admiration in her tired eyes. “You are very clever, Esther Rieloff,” she remarked. “I can understand Robert Kyle better now.”

“I think I am not clever,” Esther returned. “But, perhaps, sometimes, I can feel ‘very correctly.’” She repeated Kyle’s words as if they gave her solace.

“If you’ll stand by Rutledge, I’ll give you every bit of

help in my power," Margaret Acres said, with sudden decision. "There *are* ways in which I can help you."

Then Esther smiled, the smile that wins kindness for a child. "I have hoped very much that you would say that—I knew that by and by you would, because there is in you the heart of a good woman. I want very much all you can give me of confidence and help."

Margaret Acres drew her hand from her muff and sought Esther's, and the two rode hand-clasped for a time, until Esther said, "Will you close the window now? It is so very cold that I can hardly speak, and I wish to talk a little to you."

Margaret Acres went with Esther to Rutledge's door. The butler kept guard there and they stood for a few moments while he answered whispered questions.

"Where is *she*?" Margaret Acres asked. In that house it was no longer necessary to call Mrs. Ericson by name; even the servants passed her door with averted eyes.

"She has not left her room, Miss, not since the doctor ordered her away from Mr. Rutledge's door this morning. I have been hereabouts since you left."

"And Mr. Rutledge?"

"He is the same, Miss. The nurse says he speaks a little clearer. He is asleep at last, Miss." The last words were lost in huskiness and Esther's eyes went to him in quick appreciation, the look that takes note of a friend.

He was an elderly man, kind-eyed and simple in manner, and far too well trained to openly show curiosity, but as he took Esther's wraps and stood aside, he studied her intently, for secrets leak even through sealed doors, and it was known in the house that the master lay waiting and whispering for a woman he loved.

"Will you go in now?" Margaret Acres asked.

"Yes. I will sit by him until he wakes," Esther answered, softly. "It may be a long time, but you have promised me to stay here."

"I'll stay until the front door closes on that woman," Margaret Acres said, through her teeth, "and as much longer as you need me."

Esther stood a moment, looking down, considering. Margaret Acres noticed how tremulous her hands were and how immobile her face. In the half hour they had just spent together she had wondered, and wondered again, at this white girl with her veiled eyes and sweet voice, her fire, her softness, and her quick decision. What country and circumstances had bred her to what she was? Of her history she knew no more than she did when her eyes first lighted on her, yet in a short half hour Esther had won confidence as well as respect for herself.

Esther looked up. "When he wakes—after a time—I want Mr. Kyle to come. I have for this wish a very good reason, and I shall ask you then to send for him. I wish to see him first for one little minute, and then I want him to see Rutledge quite alone. After that I can go to *her*." She touched Margaret Acres' arm, a little gesture of farewell, and, opening the door very gently, she shut herself from their view.

The overcast sky made it appear late afternoon in the large room. There were no lights burning, but from where she stood Esther could see clearly the bed in the far room, and the long outline beneath the covers. Rutledge lay with his face turned toward her, the features made indistinct by distance, but his dark head showed very clearly against the raised pillows. A nurse sat at the foot of the bed, facing Esther, and when she saw her she rose and beckoned to some one, a gray-haired man, who came forward expectantly, but Esther only saw him vaguely. She passed him by and

went as directly to the figure on the bed as a mother would to her sick child. The face on the pillow was ashen in its setting of black hair, the lips faintly tinted like those of the dead, the closed eyes and absolute immobility of feature making its expression remote, passionless, removed from life, a thing done in gray marble. There was but little distortion, only a slight upward slant of the mouth that scarcely disturbed the regularity of feature; the haughty curve of lip and straight line of brows were as marked as they might have been in painless death; Rutledge in his utter helpless was still beautiful, the swollen lines that had marred his face gone as completely as if wiped away by loving fingers. One pallid hand lay on the covers, and Esther knelt and touched it, then close-pressed to the bedside, she bent her face to it, lying almost as still as he. She had gone back a hundred years to that morning when she had waked in the gray light, to watch his face upturned on the pillow, his hand at her cheek, even in sleep her body close held to his side. The tumultuous man who had parted from her the night before had seemed a stranger in trappings she remembered, but this still body, even more rapt than in sleep, was a something that was her very own, a possession wiped clean of every painful recollection. And she had doubted the bond that held them?

The nurse took her former place by the bed, but with her eyes turned from the kneeling figure, and the doctor went out softly to Margaret Acres in the hall. He knew that one woman had come to claim her own, which might be hers for only a short span, and the other waited without.

It was Margaret Acres who met Kyle when he came.

"How is she—and he, how is he now?" he asked as he took her hand. Margaret Acres thought as she had when she first saw him earlier in the day that he looked aged, the frowning line between his eyes deepened.

"He can speak a little more distinctly; he has had no return of that dreadful heavy-breathing stupor, but the doctor is still very anxious." Her voice sank on the words, then she rallied. "But she is wonderful. For the last hour he has been awake, and conscious that she was there, and she has talked to him, talked to him, just evenly and clearly, so he can understand every word, and she grasps what he says immediately. You see she knows the thought behind his whispered words—she knows him so well she can understand better than any one else. . . . She sent for me a little while ago and when I looked at him he was like a different being. He looked like a man again, like Rutledge, that awful terrified stare changed altogether. She wanted me to tell him, slowly and clearly, that I was his friend and hers, that the whole house was hands and feet and heart for him. You see she was teaching him not to be afraid because he couldn't move, showing him that he had more friends now he was helpless than he ever had. I understood her—she is wonderful. She'll teach him other things too, even if she has only a short time to do it in. She may even teach him not to think of himself at all." She stopped, her eyes on the fire, forgetful of Kyle.

They stood in the library, the lights lit, the blinds drawn close, for it was six o'clock and quite dark outside.

"But she wants me?" Kyle inquired, after a pause.

Margaret Acres looked up, her expression less absent. "Yes. She'll come in a minute—I sent up word."

"And Mrs. Ericson?" He spoke her name with difficulty.

The firelight glistened in Margaret Acres' pale eyes. "She has gone. . . . She sneaked out like a criminal who wants the night to hide in. No one saw her go, and she took nothing with her."

"Well, it's best that way," Kyle said, thoughtfully.

"There's not a soul who knew her who'll harbor her,"

Margaret Acres said, with sudden passion. "The papers have a partial account of last night's work, and she'll have to hide herself."

"She'll not stay here—she'll go a long distance away," Kyle answered. "But even then we can find her and keep a watch over her. Her day's done. I'm relieved beyond measure that she is out of this house."

"She ought to suffer," Margaret Acres said, through her teeth.

"I think she will," Kyle returned, quietly. "But, Miss Margaret, it's far better to have her gone."

She drew a quick breath, bringing herself back to calmness. "So Esther said. . . . James is the only one who has seen her since this morning. She opened her door for a minute late this afternoon, and looked out. James said she had the face of an old woman, sallow and sunken."

Kyle made no reply, for Esther was almost at his side, her step so light they had not heard. He took her offered hand, searching her face in silence, and Margaret Acres slipped out, leaving them alone. It was Esther who spoke.

"Thank you that you came so quickly, Mr. Kyle."

"It was to you I was coming," he said.

"Yes. . . . Mr. Kyle, I want you to do a very great kindness for me. . . . But it is a thing that will be difficult for you. . . . I will speak plainly for there is no use to play with words. Mrs. Ericson, last night, told her son yet another falseness—she said I was your mistress. . . . I have just told him every step of our friendship from the beginning—my feelings and yours, for this is a moment for nothing but the truth. He wishes that he and I be married, now, at once. He requires no other word than mine, but I pray you to go to him first and tell him your story, clearly, fully, hiding no word of truth. He is a man in fearful trouble, losing what has been to him the only thing in life—his own

unrestrained will, and it is my greatest wish that he shall find in you a friend—one who will in the future unselfishly befriend him as well as Felice and myself.”

“Esther!” For the moment Kyle could find no other word.

“You can do that, Mr. Kyle?”

“The thing doesn’t exist that I would not do for you,” Kyle said, his voice clear enough now. “You must have known it to-day when I told you you were right to come to him. I’ve been wandering around in a maze these days, thinking principally of myself. When I thought you still loved him as you did in the beginning, the man in me was on fire. When I found last night that you were only making a sacrifice of yourself, my good sense rebelled—that’s a thing not required of any woman—not the sort of sacrifice that would be demanded of you, but this last act of yours has my reverence. . . . I am yours to command, Esther. I’ll do and be anything you ask.”

She looked for a moment as if all self-control would fail her. Then her hands lifted in an abrupt gesture, passionate, eager, joyful. “You say it to me at last! You understand at last!” she cried. “Ach, Mr. Kyle, *at last* you believe in me entirely. I have one very great thing now to carry in my heart.”

Kyle looked at her in silence. He wondered if any woman had ever told her love for a man more wonderfully than Esther did in that moment of pure happiness—or so strangely.

But almost immediately she brought herself back to calmness, back to the urgency of the moment. “Ah, Mr. Kyle, when you see him you will do what I ask for his sake, not just because I ask it. No man could look on him and not feel his heart wrung. He is a man who should be just entering on his full strength—and this has happened to him. Death is a very great happiness in comparison. . . . In a few words

you will speak straight to his heart, for, being the man you are, you can no more help it than you can help being upright of purpose——” She was pleading now, the tears in her voice.

“Hush, Esther,” Kyle said, a little indistinctly. “Sit down, child. What is all this horror and misery going to do to you? That’s what I have been thinking all afternoon.”

“But I am not afraid—never again will I be afraid. I shall find my way through—easily—with you to give us counsel. . . . But now, Mr. Kyle, please go to him—I do not like to leave him for long. If after you talk he wishes you to draw up papers for him, please do not refuse. You will be told all his affairs to the very last point. There is no one I trust as I do you to see that Felice has justice done her. I have told Rutledge that I will consent to have only a very little settled on me. I do not ever want this Ericson money that has brought about such terrible trouble, but for Felice it is different—it is her *right*.”

“I have already told you that whatever you ask I’ll gladly do,” Kyle replied.

She was eager, trembling. “Let me take you up then—now—and show you where he is.”

Kyle bent to her hand and kissed it. “No, stay here and rest if you can,” he said. “I know this house better than you do,” and he left her.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN October day of smoky sunshine that softened into vague outlines the splashes of vivid yellow, crimson, and russet brown on the hillsides. Nature's color orgy was at its height, and the jealous dun-colored stretches of river bottom had sent up a veil of mist to hide the gorgeously of the revel.

It was six months since Kyle had ridden up River Road, and six months and two years since he had pledged himself to stand by Esther's right hand. In the beginning Rutledge had clung to him simply because helplessness and terror had urged him to listen to Esther's persuasions. He had endeavored to see a friend in the man who spoke to him so fairly and honestly, who so briefly and unaffectedly offered him his strength to lean upon. In the beginning Rutledge had been like a bewildered child, oppressed by a great horror, ready to cling to any outstretched hand, the passions of love and jealousy sunk to nothing. Because in all his misspent life Esther had been the only woman who had convinced him of unselfish love, so in his hour of intensest fear, when he lay incapable of movement, he had called for her as a child will for its mother, an instinctive appeal, ephemeral doubts as completely forgotten as if they had never existed. She had come to him immediately, offered herself utterly, soothing terror, making even the thought of death bearable because of sudden relief from abject fear. Esther would stand between him and that fear, keeping it at bay, even if he must lie hopeless of the future, dying slowly. He had received Kyle's strength and counsel as merely a further manifestation of Esther's power to afford assistance. Rutledge Ericson was still supreme in his own small world, for the warp and woof

of character is not changed in a day. In those early weeks it never occurred to him to consider Esther's course as one of self-sacrifice, or Kyle's friendship as unusual; that requires the capacity to look upon others as one does upon oneself—an impossibility to a Rutledge Ericson new to suffering. He took Esther's offer of herself eagerly, and Kyle's expression of sympathy and friendship without hesitation; he needed them to keep off fear.

The following weeks had brought hope, the possibility of more than a partial recovery, of years that might be lived through with dragging feet, but a future nevertheless. Rutledge had embraced the possibility with passionate eagerness, clinging to it. He held Esther then firmly to his side, savagely jealous now of Kyle, of all men, proud of Felice, wildly impatient of the present, and eager for the future; his brain clearer and more receptive than it had ever been in those years when he had merely lived by impulse. After that space of awakened passions and active mentality, Rutledge began to do Esther some degree of justice. He began to have some adequate conception of her character, and of the motives that had made possible her denial of Kyle. There came to him then, gradually, a more accurate understanding of Kyle himself, of the quality of his devotion to Esther, a devotion that was complete enough to embrace Rutledge in its scope. There was a something in the realization that killed jealousy in its narrower sense. But this had taken time, Esther's daily, hourly influence. She was at his side, directing his thoughts, molding his ideas, bringing him material for conceptions that opened a new world. And the stultifying influence of drink and ill-living was gone.

It was during the first days of hope, when Rutledge lay consumed by impatience and daily increasing jealousy and discontent, that Esther conceived a plan, pondered it, and then took it to Rutledge. Curled up beside him on the couch,

nursing her ankle, one hand gesticulating, her eyes alight, the occasionally impassioned Esther still unchanged, she proceeded to unfold her plan, its beauties, and its possibilities. The heat of Spring would be upon them soon; already the doctors talked of a change from that gloomy mansion. Behold the thing that had occurred to her! Did Rutledge remember the hill above the Rieloff cottage? Did he remember that its top was flat, and could he not see, even at this distance, the beautiful boulders and pines that covered it? Its brow overhung the river, and its back was turned to a lovely rolling country. Did he remember the view of the world it commanded? Could they not take the Rieloff cottage for a few months and build themselves a home on that hilltop, a house they could plan together, and the building of which Rutledge could oversee? Think of the many drives over that hill-country! They could have horses, cushioned seats, a couch on wheels that would take him up and down the hillside. Easy roads must be made under the chestnut trees, the house must have many porches, both open and shaded, he would live in the sunshine all day long, and by and by he would be walking about, quite himself again. And think of Felice! She could live in the sun also, with the woods and the river for playthings. And Rutledge had taken fire from her. Next she had brought their small world to consent, the physicians, Kyle, and Margaret Acres.

Esther had taken alarm in time, and drawn Rutledge away from morbid brooding, gnawing jealousy, and passionate impatience over his own infirmity. She had surmounted many difficulties, and carried out her plan, with an almost immediate benefit to Rutledge. At River Road she was so entirely his that there was no possibility of suspicion, no one could come near her without his knowledge, and she wrapped him about so completely with new interests that he forgot to brood over himself. His undertakings on the hilltop took

many hours of the day, and Esther and Felice filled the rest. For Felice it was a strange new world, in which she darted about like a caged humming-bird set free. Margaret Acres came to them for a week at a time during the summer, but Kyle did not come. He knew perfectly how things were with Rutledge, and he understood why Esther planned so wisely; he waited with patience.

And up to a certain point Rutledge's condition improved. By autumn of the first year he was creeping about on crutches, a watchful man at his elbow. But at that point he remained stationary, and as time went on he, as well as those about him, knew that a more complete recovery would not be his. The conviction had settled upon him gradually, and did not overwhelm him, for those long months of constant companionship with Esther had brought him a certain poise. He had learned lessons of patience, a recognition of the inevitable, a somewhat better understanding of unselfishness, a saner outlook altogether than had ever been his even in the days of perfect health. It was a year with Esther and helplessness that had tutored him, and it was then that Kyle had come to them for his first visit, and completed his conquest of Rutledge. It was not Esther who saw Kyle during those two days, it was Rutledge, and it was then that the two had talked man to man. This was in May, and in September Kyle came again, and still again in mid-winter, visits Rutledge urged. Then in early Spring had come the hurried summons. The call had come to Rutledge in the night, a painless passing away in unconsciousness.

Rutledge Ericson was laid beside his father, and a note of a single line from Kyle took the message to Mrs. Ericson in the cheerless pension in Leipsic where she had considered herself hidden from all who knew her, all except the determined surveillance that Kyle had kept upon her throughout those two years. She had wandered from France into Italy,

and from Italy to Germany, always avoiding those who would know her, clinging desperately to every franc, but ever restlessly moving on. And she moved on again after that, a small, wrinkled woman with staring eyes, given to fluent speech, and again to immovable silences.

After Rutledge was gone Esther talked long and fully with Kyle and Mr. Burnham of Felice's affairs, and very briefly of her own. It was her wish to keep Felice at River Road until she became old enough to understand the attitude of those about her, for the world in general had not forgiven Esther for the past. It viewed her askance over a chilly shoulder. Her friends were those who had come into contact with her, and were capable of judging more fairly. Their devotion she had. When Felice was older she must take her to other surroundings.

Then Esther had returned to her home on River Road. She was free now to do a thing she had desired to do for two years. The Rieloff cottage was hers, and she brought Mr. Rieloff from the asylum, and placed him again among his books and flowers with a nurse to watch over him. He was quite childish now, and had only a vague recollection of Esther, but, with the strange inconsequence of the unbalanced, he remembered his garden, the names, the seasons, and the proper cultivation of each flower. He planted and tended them with a joy as complete as Felice gave to the chasing of butterflies.

And Esther? There was no one but Esther herself who knew the inner Esther during those two years. What were the thoughts she gave to Kyle, or a possible future, none knew, least of all Kyle. In those two years not a single intimate word had passed between them. Esther held herself rigidly to some course upon which she had decided, and not even Kyle was wise enough to say what that might be, but it was a curious coincidence that when Kyle was bidden to River

Road, Margaret Acres was also asked. In those two years Kyle and Margaret Acres had become warm friends, for she was the one person to whom Kyle could speak freely of Esther. To Margaret Acres Esther was a sort of wonder-woman, a source of endless interest.

So Esther had come back to River Road, and Kyle had been far too wise to overstep by an inch the rigid line she had drawn. He had clung to patience during those two years, and he waited on now from week to week for the sign he felt *must* come in time. He had already waited so long he could wait a little longer. He had come to stand in awe of the complex woman that lay in Esther; therefore he restrained himself, and waited, but he searched her monthly letters avidly for the sign he felt would come. Each week of that long Spring and Summer he wrote to her, the tale of daily events, his thoughts, his observations, a great deal of himself, but he never once said, "I love you," or "May I come to you?"

One night early in October he received a letter from her that set him afire. It was a surprise letter, for it was not two weeks since the last. She wrote as usual, rather briefly, of Felice, their household, her books, a story she wished to write, but upon every word lay the weight of utter depression, as if she wrote with listless fingers words that came from a leaden heart, and at the very end was this:

"Margaret writes me many times that you see her very often, so I feel you must know whom she means when she says she loves a good man very much, and that he loves her dearly. She says she must speak with me before she tells his name, that she will come very soon to see me. I am glad she is happy—there is in this world so little happiness. I think, however, that I cannot wait until she speaks, so I write to you. Perhaps you will tell me who he is, for to-morrow you write me as usual. In your life, which is so full, it is kind of you to remember sometimes that I am alone in my

house on the hill. To-day I have walked many miles through the woods, and I think I am very tired, but perhaps it is because I love the leaves best when they are in bud, not when they are dying."

So Margaret's expressions of happiness had wrung this confession of loneliness from her. Was it not Esther's way of asking him to come to her? "It is kind of you to remember sometimes that I am alone in my house on the hill." Was there a moment in the day when he did not remember it? He was intensely grateful to Margaret Acres for her happiness over her recent engagement. Her acquaintance with the gray-haired physician who had labored with her over Rutledge in those first hours of helplessness had led to a somewhat curious but a very happy conclusion. Kyle had been highly pleased over it, for her marriage would take her out of a circle that was unworthy of her.

Kyle went to bed that night with riot in his blood, and rose with the first tinge of dawn, so it was not yet mid-day when he turned from River Road into the driveway that led to Esther's home on the hilltop. It was a long way up, a road that led around boulders, and took advantage of every crest from which an extended view was possible, but Kyle did not draw rein once, and had only vague attention for things about him. Esther had begged that the woods be left to their natural luxuriance, so on tree trunk and rock and over the brown earth trailed the yellow of wild grape and the crimson of Virginia creeper. It was an intensely still day, the air laden with the faint steam-mist that the sun drew from a frost chilled earth. From the river bottom came the jangle of cow-bells, and from miles up the gorge the thin shriek of a laboring coal-train; far above Kyle's head a squirrel chattered angrily.

He had almost reached the summit, and was rounding the last obstructing boulder, when he suddenly came upon Esther. She walked midway of the road, hatless, and carrying a basket on her arm. Her stop was as abrupt as Kyle's check

of his horse, and the next moment he was out of the saddle and at her side. It was she, as usual, who found words first.

"Ach! . . . Mr. Ky-el!"

There were many and complicated modulations possible in that single exclamation of Esther's, and she ran the gamut of them all, but she had ended in a note of settled apathy that turned Kyle a dusky red. She was heavy-eyed, and as white as the bit of lace at her throat; she did not see his hand, she remained unflushed and cold, her brows lifted slightly, marking faint lines in her forehead.

Kyle's heat and haste were dashed completely; he was so keenly hurt that he stammered like one in the extremity of embarrassment. "I thought—I could answer your letter best by coming—Esther."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Kyle. . . . I remember I asked about Margaret—it was kind of you to come instead of writing." Her brows had lifted somewhat more, her eyes robbed entirely of expression.

"I thought you wanted me to come," Kyle said, savage under disappointment.

"I *am* glad you came," she returned, with an effort at apology, a slight emphasis that sought to reassure him, "but you came so suddenly. . . . I think—we will go back to the house, where I can give you some refreshment. You travel so early." There was not a tinge of irony or of anger in her manner; she appeared merely indifferent, frozen, and a little vague. In all his knowledge of her Kyle had never seen her like this. He began to be slightly puzzled as well as wretchedly unhappy. Evidently he had entirely misunderstood her letter.

"I don't need any refreshment—of the kind you suggest," he answered, briefly. "Are you going down the hill, Esther? I'll go with you." Perhaps if they walked all that way together he might thaw this frozen displeasure of hers, for Kyle felt it must be that.

Esther glanced at her basket. "I go down to Mr. Rieloff," she said, in the same unmoved voice, "but for that there is no haste at all, so I am glad to turn back. . . . If you come this way there is a little path through the rocks, much shorter than the road, to take us up," and, turning, she crossed to the footpath without stopping to ask if it pleased him to take that way. Her lifeless manner was astounding; she must be ill.

"Are you ill, Esther?" he asked, anxiously. "Why didn't you tell me so in your letter?"

She spoke with sudden sharpness, not even turning to answer him. "I am perfectly well—certainly."

Kyle was flushed and miserable. He jerked impatiently at his horse, and followed a few yards up the steep path, then stopped. "Esther," he said, abruptly, "I'm going back. There is one thing I can't endure. I'll never listen to another denial—and I see it in your face. Pleading is useless with you—that I've learned. I misunderstood your letter. I'll go back and just—"

She whirled about in the narrow path, suddenly transformed, wide-eyed, vivid, questioning. "I do not understand?" she said, breathlessly.

Kyle stared at her. "You don't understand—what?" he asked, bewildered.

She took the two or three steps that lay between them, hastily, but also a little uncertainly, as if her knees shook too much for steady walking. It brought her lifted face close to his, for the steepness of the path raised her almost to a level with him. In those few moments her face had changed again, appearing suddenly drawn and pinched, her lips stiff.

"Mr. Kyle, in all these months—you are very much with Margaret—"

"Yes," he replied, even more completely bewildered.

"I thought—you must—love—her—"

"I—love—*Margaret!*" Kyle cried, too utterly amazed even for movement. "Why—good Lord——!"

"*No?*" she questioned, with intense earnestness, searching his eyes. "No?—you do not?" Kyle's answer needed no words, and she turned away abruptly. "Ah, it is not true, then. . . . She did not mean you—it is not you," she whispered softly to herself, her hands lifting and joining, a gesture of indescribable relief. "No, it is *not* you!"

Understanding had fallen upon Kyle, but his happiness made him only the more gentle of voice and touch. He took her lifted hands and drew her to him, laying her arms about his neck. "You little child," he said, smiling into her eyes. "So you have been lonely for me—up there on the hilltop?"

"Ah, these weeks of loneliness and uncertainty! Mr. Kyle, when I thought with my brain only I felt as I did in the beginning, that your life must not be hampered by mine, and at those times I said, 'Yes, another woman will be far better for him—some one in whom he can have pride.' I thought Margaret would be better for you, but when you began to go often to her, and your letters spoke of her as a dear friend, I began to die slowly. My brain still said it would be best, but I grew so cold I knew I never again could be warm. I made you feel you must not come to me, yet something that had kept me alive through everything was going out of me, and when Margaret's letter came and I was certain she meant you, I felt really dead—only I must keep on for Felice—she had only me." Her speech was rapid, little above a whisper, but Kyle caught it.

"And when you 'thought with your heart as well as your brain'?" he questioned, softly.

Her hands clasped his neck then, but her bent head gave him only her hair to caress. "Ah, then? . . . I felt in me the power to give you so full a happiness that you would have perfect content—that by wrapping you about with happiness I could help, not hinder you, in your useful life. . . . It is

these last two years of endeavor that have given me that confidence in myself—and also . . .”

“‘And also’? . . . Go on, sweet one.”

Her hands at his neck held him closer. “Mr. Kyle, I give you my whole heart, its selfishness as well as its courage. I have wanted you—*so*—as you are now—in my arms—just my own—always. I have had that wish ever since the times when we sat under my skylight, and you taught me what is the heart of a good man.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice harsh under emotion. “You give me far more than my due—I shall not forget. You are the same Esther, unchanged, stronger than I am in most ways, but a little child as well. What is the rest of the world to me—or any other woman in it! In all this time have you never guessed the pride that has been growing and growing in me? I’ve stood a long way off, but I have never once moved my eyes from you, watching you triumph, watching you prove yourself the woman I knew you were. . . . I have kept my heart clean and warm for you, Esther; nestle down in it now, and let me wrap you close.”

There was silence between them then, until he begged, “Look at me now, sweetheart.” But she only pressed her cheek the closer to his rough coat, and he reminded her, “You have never kissed me—never once. . . . I’m waiting.”

She turned then, slowly, lifting warm lips that swept his cheek and met his whisper of love, and they clung to each other, the need of one meeting the need of the other, a mingling, an interchange, a rising into ecstasy, a sinking into perfect content, the joy of the present a foretaste of the future.

Kyle’s horse cropped a tuft of grass at their feet, raised calm eyes to their happiness, and wandered on up the path.

THE END



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